

The End That Crowned Our Work:
My Experience and Growth as a Musician and
Future Educator with The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Each summer, thousands of student musicians participate in the activity of drum corps. Many of today’s top educators and performers have participated in drum corps in some way, yet it carries with it a negative connotation in the world of academic music. Drum corps participants overwhelmingly cite positive perceptions of growth as performers and educators. I created a memoir that guides readers through my first summer as a member of The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, describing my personal drum corps experience. I then analyze data from members of the corps that supports my belief that the positive experience I wrote about is not unique, but is a trend in the organization and does not reflect the traditional criticisms of the activity as a whole.

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I would like to thank Dr. Russ Gavin for being an inspiring corps director and setting a standard for education in the drum corps activity. My experience defies the common criticisms largely in part due to his commitment as an educator to provide The Blue Stars with the best pedagogy available.

I would like to thank Lizzie, Zach, and Emma for reading my chapters as my memoir slowly came to life over the last year. Their support and enthusiasm made this overwhelmingly ambitious project easier to tackle.

I would like to thank all of the Blue Stars I had the honor of marching with. Without them, there is no story. *FCO!*

Author's Statement

Since my first drum corps show in 2004, the drum corps activity has played an important role in my musical development and my decision to pursue music education, showing me another medium through which performers can express sounds together in an ensemble. The marching aspect excites my visual sense, while the competitive aspect makes the drum corps season thrilling, waiting to see which corps will be crowned the victor – the Drum Corps International World Champion.

All the while, I hear drum corps and the marching arts berated as a lesser art form, a bastardization of music's integrity. Having marched for ten years, three of those in drum corps, I'm hurt that others could view the art as anything less than a group of musicians striving for excellence while pleasing the crowd, just as any performing ensemble does. I have never understood the critic's method of thinking, so I set out to justify my own beliefs, using my creative project to refute the common misconceptions about drum corps as an activity and the marching arts experience as a whole.

The truly "creative" portion of my creative project is a memoir that guides the reader from my first encounter with drum corps through my first of three seasons with The Blue Stars. The reader follows me to my first audition, through the winter months, spring training, early tour, the highly competitive regional season, and Finals week. Along the way, the reader experiences the same things that make the drum corps activity educational through my perceptions of the pedagogy used. This depiction is intentional, as many of the activity's harshest critics, in my experience, have little knowledge of what the activity truly is or what is being taught.

Following the creative memoir is a research report that further supports my opinion. I surveyed members I had marched with in The Blue Stars, asking them to rate their overall musical experience as defined by their perceived personal growth as a performer and teacher. The results overwhelmingly confirm my belief that, for those in the activity – specifically those who march The Blue Stars, there are benefits, and the critics cling to outdated opinions of what that activity is.

With this project, I hope to bring to life the experience that is drum corps while advocating on its behalf. The creative and academic portions of this project work together to create a product that I hope inspires the reader and leads to a transformation in how drum corps and the marching arts are viewed.

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The End That Crowned Our Work

Justin Ekstrom

Chapter 1: Origins

The billowing white fabric of the RCA Dome crept into view over a horizon dotted with rooftops. Five members of the South Newton marching band and I shared the July heat with our director, Mr. Stowers, as we headed south on I-65 en route to the dome. Our destination seemed to fit shoulder to shoulder with the skyscrapers that mark the Indianapolis skyline. Long before Lucas Oil Stadium replaced the dome, the city now home to Drum Corps International's most prestigious event was just another stop on the 2004 DCI tour. It was impossible to predict how Indianapolis would soon represent the activity that would change my life.

Several months earlier, I began to learn saxophone in preparation for summer band and the middle school ensemble that was to follow my summer training. My father kept a friendly relationship with Mrs. Joy Stowers, a former band director at South Newton High School. Growing up, she often delivered gifts in the form of old percussion instruments and mallets. Reflecting her generous personality, my parents were able to purchase a saxophone from her, and I began private lessons immediately.

These humble beginnings soon turned into a zealous passion for music's opportunities, and I found myself recruited at age eleven to join the marching band that summer, a tradition renewed by Mrs. Stowers' son Mel after the school had gone several years without one. Mr. Stowers, a veteran of the 1988 Bluecoats, assembled a modest group of students from the middle and high schools and

created an ensemble built on community, established the fundamentals of marching, and created the first show I would ever perform.

As none of the members had ever been in a marching ensemble, it was important for Mr. Stowers to show what the marching arts could be. Just weeks before our first performance at the Indiana State Fair, a small group of students from the band, myself included, took a trip to the 2004 DCI Midwestern Championships at the RCA Dome. I doubt I had an adequate understanding of what I was going to witness at this event, nor do I remember why I decided to go – probably because it was band, and I liked band. In the most cliché way possible, my life would not be the same had I not joined the group on a hot bus to Indianapolis in late July.

After ten years, time has reduced this life-changing event to a collection of a few short memories in my mind. I remember hearing about how many different names Spirit of Atlanta had used, and that there had been an impressive force in the activity known as Star of Indiana. I remember the presence of the Santa Clara Vanguard for their cymbal line, but a group of men in green held my attention as they played the theme from 007. I learned to identify them as The Cavaliers, leaving with one of their retro t-shirts (which, inexplicably, still fits). Though I returned from that experience excited to excel at home with our show of nine sets, drum corps would not stick with me. Not yet.

I finished sixth grade with more passion for band, and I was ready for another season of marching. At some point before the 2005 season, I joined the countless other bandos and fell in love with the white team from Rockford. I arrived

in Indianapolis for the '05 Midwestern Championship wearing my Cavaliers shirt from the year before, proudly displaying a sign I had made for Phantom Regiment in Microsoft Paint. That Christmas, I tore open the wrapping paper on a gift to reveal a Phantom Regiment shirt and their 2005 "On The Road" tour DVD. I watched it hundreds of times, usually several times in a row. My friends began to hate me for how often I talked about it. I didn't make it to any live shows in 2006 or 2007, and I missed the '07 ESPN broadcast of Finals except for the top four. With no live shows, I resorted more and more to the 2005 DVD for my fix. It was the only thing keeping me involved in DCI. 2008 would bring South Newton the third new band director in four years, but it would also mark my return to the activity live.

The new high school director, Andy Earnest, had marched the 2001 and 2002 seasons with The Cavaliers and was the '02 baritone soloist. He knew the importance of DCI as an example of commitment to the marching arts, and organized a band trip to Bloomington for the 2008 semifinals. Stepping off the bus outside Memorial Stadium, my body absorbed the sounds of battery warmups. I was back. I remember the drunken *Sasparilla* of Troopers, the dozens of balloons in Glassmen's *Kar-ne-vel*, and my first experience with The Blue Stars.

"This was the corps my brother marched with," Mr. Earnest stated proudly. "They have a Tour de France theme." I assumed they would be playing music from the Tour de France – as if it had its own theme. I was uninterested. I anxiously awaited the appearance of the Cavaliers and Phantom. Looking back, it is difficult to fathom that my drum majors in 2012 and 2013 – Mark Donahue and Zack Crissman, respectively – were rookies on the field. I was watching my future leadership and

two role models perform four years before I would ever attempt the activity. I regret my disinterest. The Cavaliers would go on to blow my mind, but Phantom would win my heart. Their capture of the 2008 DCI title had my adolescent emotions in an uproar. All I truly wanted for Christmas that year was the DCI Finals DVD. I yearned to relive that show and that corps. I tore open the wrapping paper on a gift from my aunt that December to reveal exactly what I had requested. I immersed myself in the 2008 finalist corps. They became drum corps to me.

The next summer I would attend Finals in person, the first of three. Each Christmas, I opened a present from my aunt to reveal the corresponding DVD and CD set. I lived these shows. My corps apparel expanded to six shirts representing the two corps from Illinois and Carolina Crown. It couldn't get any better, yet I watched finals in 2011 with a profound jealousy. The experiences each member on the field received far exceeded what I was getting in the crowd. My passion was slipping away from me, and I had done nothing to make it a reality.

Shortly after that evening, I promised myself I would march. The transition to college only supported my decision. At Ball State University, I joined the Pride of Mid-America, where I met drum corps veterans from all over – Blue Stars, Glassmen, Pioneer, and Teal Sound. The Pride performed in Lucas Oil Stadium in mid September, and I watched with longing as the four Blue Stars vets took a photo together. I looked up into the vast expanse of space in the stadium. I eyed every seat, imagining the presence of a crowd, the roar of approval. I thought back to early August and how everybody at Ball State thought I had marched since I arrived the day after Finals. I wrote on Facebook:

[I have] been asked all day how my Finals performance went. Missing day one of BSU band for Finals and wearing my Phantom Regiment shirt led everybody to believe I had marched. When I put that together with the waves of emotion that overcame me when I saw their show, I can't think of aging out and not having marched. I will march a corps.

Now standing on the field of Lucas Oil, I chose to act – to put my plan in motion. I fantasized about being the next Will Pitts, the podium identity of Phantom Regiment for the two most influential seasons of drum corps from that point in my life. As a saxophone player, I felt the best way to experience the activity would be from the same position. I gathered all the information needed to complete an application for a conductor audition for my dream corps. An excited Facebook post shared my plans with the world. Everything was close to coming together. My wildest dreams would become a reality. I ended up experiencing a nightmare like no other.

My pocket buzzed to life, my Spartacus ringtone piercing the silence of the Sursa Hall lobby, the majority of its rooms empty – my phone's screen sprang to life, the title "Mom" announcing my new guest. I answered, quickly pulling the receiver from my ear. Her tone was not enthusiastic or encouraging.

"Please explain this drum corps business." Please, in this case, was a formality resulting from how she was raised. There was no polite request to this inquiry.

"Well," I put simply, "I've been wanting to do drum corps for a long time, you know? Now that I'm in college, I guess I'm just realizing how little time I have left to

do it. I got the information for a drum major audition with Phantom Regiment, so now all I need is to pay for it. I'm going to – "

"How are you getting there?"

"I'll find a way."

Silence

"I don't want maybes. How are you getting there?"

"I'll find a ride with somebody. I know there are people from IU who march there. I could maybe try to get a ride with one of them." There was an uncomfortable void on the other end. I continued. "Or, I don't know. Maybe I could use Mel's car." An abrupt scoff told me just how wrong I was about everything. The scoff did not translate to "No, you will not drive your sister's car to an unknown location," it translated to "You have never thought anything through in your life, and this is the last time you'll get away with it."

"Absolutely not. That is not your vehicle to use, and I am not funding a seven hour trip."

"It's only six..." In retrospect, that was a useless point, but at the time, it was the best rebuttal I had.

"No. Rockford is over six hours from Muncie, and the camp is further north than that." I shut my eyes and tried to exhale the tension from my body. She knew the location of the camp. She had done research. If you ever find yourself in an argument with my mom, and she has done research about a topic before engaging in the debate, you have already lost. I panicked.

“It isn’t that much further. I don’t even know if I’ll get the spot. I just want to try.”

“And what happens when you get the spot and have to drive every month to camp? What happens when the roads get bad in the winter? You can’t miss camp – you’re the drum major.” I saw a glimmer of hope. Her anticipation of these dilemmas meant she believed there was a real chance of me getting the spot. My confidence grew.

“I’ll worry about that when it happens – if it happens.” A more direct way of saying what my mom heard is, “I have nothing planned, and I give up. I’m sorry this was ever an idea, and you won’t hear about it again.”

The argument continued for far too long, circling back on itself time and time again, the same content discussed in newer and more pointless ways. She asked question after question, demanding impossibly specific responses for which I had no answers. I had only recently made the decision to act on this dream. Years of planning were necessary for the answers she desired. I fought viciously to make my point of view clear. My mother never budged. The conversation ended.

I had pulled out all the stops, but got no volume in return. With one phone call, my dreams of drum corps halted once more. It had been eight years since my first show – eight years of desiring a way for the fantasy of marching to become reality. I had invested too much emotion for it to end so soon. My thoughts turned to the other parental unit. If I could get my father to support my idea, perhaps this could still happen. My thumbs scanned the screen for his location within my phone. His name lit up as I furiously pressed the call button.

“Hello?” I have always loved how carefree and casual my father’s voice sounds when addressing people. It is genuine, unforced, prompting a relaxation that soothes the soul. This time he seemed agitated.

“Okay, um. Has mom talked to you about the Phantom Regiment audition?”

He sighed. “I don’t really know what it is you’re trying to do, but the way she explained it... I don’t know how it’s possible.”

“I can find a ride – or if I can just have Mel’s car...”

“No.”

“What if I just drive it home. That’s halfway. I can switch vehicles after that.”

“The answer is no. You’re not driving her car anywhere.”

“I don’t know how to convey how much I want this. I’ve been wanting this for eight years.”

“I never actually thought you’d want to march. I just assumed it was something you watched.”

Like my previous conversation, his end of the line went silent, his mind unchanged. I sat in silence, contemplating my next strategy. Before a thought could form in my mind, the lobby echoed with the triumphant cries of “I am Spartacus” as I was again connected to my mother, 180 miles away.

The exact details of our second conversation are unclear, as I’ve tried to block out much of the emotional devastation, but I remember much shouting from both of us – her shouting at me for selfishly calling my father for another answer, my hushed shouting (so as not to further disturb the echoing lobby) regarding how

much this meant to me – how both her and dad had carelessly failed to realize that this was worth trying in my mind.

She hung up on me, mid response. I called back. No answer. I called my dad. The same. I called my sister. She informed me that mom kept her up to date via angry messages, and then proceeded to tell me how selfish I was being before hanging up on me as well.

I never anticipated my parents shooting down my greatest dream so quickly – so carelessly. I had nowhere to go.

Reflecting on my options, I remembered Jason Schmidt, a future music educator two years ahead of me at Ball State – and a Blue Star. Blue Stars were not on my radar often. I hardly remembered '08, in '09 I held a grudge against them for beating Phantom, I wouldn't learn to appreciate '10 until I connected the music with Western High School's show from the same year (music that I very much enjoyed), and I hated '11. Regardless, I spent time on their website as I decided where to march, and with no experience, I was in no place to discredit a Top 12 corps. The corps held camps in Indianapolis, just an hour away, and my parents couldn't stop me from living my dream if I had a way to get there.

I messaged Jason a few days later asking about the possibility of a ride. He had encouraged me to audition this season for the experience, even if I didn't feel ready, and I hoped he could help make that happen. I asked for a ride in return for gas money or food. His response was simple. If he could afford a vehicle for himself, I could ride along. Even with that lingering "if", the possibility encouraged me. The idea of travelling to camp with a returning vet in his third year, his ageout, inspired

me. I thought of the things I could learn in travel time alone – memories, stories, hardships, and tips. This was the way to march. If I could get to Indianapolis for camp, nothing could stop my determination, not even my parents. I was going to be a Blue Star. I should tell them.

I called my dad. I was optimistic. I had reviewed all their arguments and had answers for everything. How would I get to camp? Jason Schmidt, vehicle pending, or Aaron Lewis, my saxophone section leader in marching band who was auditioning on trumpet. What would happen if I made it? I would continue riding with one of those two, likely Jason considering he was a returning member. What would I play? I had already secured a baritone for campus band and was teaching myself in the evenings. The ringing stopped.

“Hello?” My father’s voice lacked the agitation present during our previous conversation.

“I have a question.”

Silence. “Yes?”

“Transportation was the main thing keeping me from auditioning at Phantom, right?”

His response was something about not using my sister’s car, lack of planning, and distance. I heard “yes.”

“There’s a corps that works out of Indy. They’re based out of La Crosse, Wisconsin, but they have all their camps in Indy. There are a few guys here going to that camp that said I could ride with them. I have a baritone that I’m learning to play

for the audition. I have a check made out for the audition fees, and I'm ready to mail it. I want your permission."

He agreed and seemed encouraging. I ended the call and ran excitedly to my room, grabbed the envelope, and took it to the mail slot downstairs. Like a needle and thread, I slid the letter through the narrow opening, and with a graceful drop, it joined the other outgoing messages, marking the first real step toward making my dream a reality.

The next three months would test my dedication. I had less than twelve weeks to learn a completely new instrument and play it well enough to make one of the greatest marching ensembles in the country – in addition to 18 credits my first semester of college. I obtained a beginner baritone book from Mr. Earnest and used this as my guide. Every night I would try to add a few more pages. I spent at least an hour with the foreign piece of metal each evening, slowly making progress. One evening, I sent a recording to Amanda Price, a friend and former Blue Star from California.

"Was that supposed to be the dreidel song?"

Good enough. My playing was somewhat recognizable.

I signed up for basketball band on baritone to secure a marching horn that I could use at camp. I tested the instrument in a practice room, learning two things. First, the school-owned marching instruments were in less than ideal condition. My lead pipe was twisted almost 90 degrees, the valves clanked and stuck, and the third valve slide refused to move. Second, I learned that even a King baritone was heavier than I could hold.

The monotony of fighting through new music every evening after classes continued. I could hear improvements, but it was obvious I was not a brass player. I wondered what I was getting myself into. How did I believe that I could do this? I developed a fallback plan. If I didn't get a contract by January, I would admit defeat for the year, practice brass over the summer, march baritone with the Pride of Mid-America next fall, and try again for 2013. I practiced harder.

November 18th arrived and with it, the first camp for the 2012 Blue Stars. No day could have gone slower. I anticipated the end of marching rehearsal so I could pack my belongings into my section leader's car and ride to camp. When the time came, we had to pick up two passengers - returning Blue Stars vets from Ball State, Jason Schmidt and Sean Villanueva. Sean was first. Waiting outside the Johnson Complex to pick him up, Aaron did his best to describe Sean to me, as I could not recall who he was. When Sean came out of the dorm, I was shocked. An energetic, fully bearded, Hispanic-looking (but truly Pilipino) music major approached our car. I recognized him from marching band, but I thought he already aged out. After all, he had spent two years with the corps already – and that beard! He crammed his belongings into the trunk of the car, hopped in the seat behind me, and we left for Jason's house. I felt honored to be riding to camp with a member who had marched Houdini and ReBourne and, as I would find out, was returning as tuba section leader. We pulled up alongside Jason's house and he joined us. Through my careful observations up to this point, I had noticed that Jason was quiet. He said only what he needed to, and even then it was in a relaxed, barely audible tone. He slid into the back seat with Sean, and I observed a very different personality. On the way to the

first camp of his ageout summer next to a friend whom he had shared two seasons of joy and pain with, I heard stories exchanged between the two back passengers – references to events I didn't experience, names of people I had never met, and places I had never been. Occasionally, I would overhear something humorous and would laugh along. I couldn't stop myself from finding the story enjoyable, but I felt as though my laughter was disrespectful to their experiences. I wasn't at those rehearsals or with those people. How could I connect to what they were saying? Why should I laugh at the personal moments of these two knowledgeable passengers? I tried to stay quiet and learn.

Through these stories, I started to piece together the puzzle that was The Blue Stars. I learned the names of individual pieces – Megan Cornman, the horn sergeant (Jason called her in the car to secure his baritone from the previous summer so nobody would use it), Mike Villano, the 3rd year vet who would be the baritone section leader, and Sean's nickname, Nacho, to distinguish him from the countless other Seans. Jason pulled out his binder, complete with show music from previous years. As he and Sean relived the most difficult parts of these shows, I glanced back and looked at the ink on paper. I had heard those notes played on instruments, meeting my ears with the power that only a DCI hornline can achieve. To see the visual representation of those sounds reminded me why I was travelling to Indianapolis. I was determined to secure those ink-filled pages for myself.

The drive continued for some time. The sun had set. I could see nothing but the reds and whites of car lights as they entered or left the black abyss that surrounded us. I-69 ended, becoming just another highway. I sensed my physical

journey coming to an end, the ambitious one just beginning. The illuminated structure of the Pepsi Coliseum appeared amongst other buildings and lights. The centerpiece of the Indiana State Fairgrounds, it sits across from the grandstand. My first marching performance took place in front of that grandstand the same year I first saw drum corps. No jump could be more drastic than from track band to DCI. How fitting that I should return.

We sped through the fairgrounds toward the 4-H building where camp was held, my excitement growing.

“There it is!” Sean’s voice showed more excitement than I had, though his excitement also lacked my underlying fear. I looked to see what Sean was referencing. Alongside the building proudly stood the corps equipment trailer, the same trailer I watched narrowly miss a curb entering the lot in Muncie just months earlier. My worlds of fan and member continued to collide.

Aaron parked. I could see into the basement of the building. Scores of people, all clad in identical blue shirts with a large “my name is” sticker graphic on the front moved around inside. Percussionists grouped together with practice pads, all playing through audition material. Tuba players fought against the weight of a horn that was much heavier than anticipated. We collected our things from the car. Sean and Jason took off for the building, gear in hand, as if they had never left the activity. They never looked back for Aaron or me. They got the ride they needed. They were home. Aaron and I approached the building, glowing in the darkness, filled with the sounds of drum corps. In my attempts to bring my book bag, sleeping bag, pillow, duffle, and horn, I lost my grip on several items, and they fell to the snow. Aaron did

not wait for me. Trailing behind the others in the darkness I collected my things.

With one final thought of what I was getting myself into, I took a literal step toward a new and exciting future.

Chapter 2: November

The sound inside the building was overwhelming. The chaotic power of hundreds of people all attempting to be heard over the mix of drum pads and horns met my ears with a chaotic power. I couldn't focus on one stimulus before something else took over.

Drums. Tuba. Drums. Trumpet screamer. Someone shouting. Drums. Laughter. Drums.

A nervous excitement from new members flooded the building, mixing with the happiness of returning members as they caught up with their corps family. I admired the corps jacket of each vet passing by, a proud display of their participation in the corps. I noticed the coin and beads many members wore around their neck. The corps necklace displayed to others how long the member had been with the corps. As I processed everything around me, I felt at home. No arc had been set, no notes performed – I had done nothing with this organization, yet I suddenly knew that this was where I wanted to be.

Unfortunately, reassuring feelings wouldn't get me a contract. I checked in, took my belongings to the men's sleeping area, and anxiously awaited the start of my first drum corps camp. As I pulled the audition shirt over my head, it seemed as if it gave me power. I joined the masses in dark blue, distinguishable only by the nametag screen printed to the front of my shirt. Written in Sharpie it read, "Justin E. Bari/Euph."

Before we did anything else, we were required to attend a full corps meeting in the 4-H auditorium. Hundreds of new and returning members from all sections

crowded into the open space. School music conflicts had kept both drum majors, Mark Donahue and Zack Crissman from the evening rehearsal. I had heard Mark's name spoken time and time again by Brandt Crocker on Finals recordings alongside Zach Ashcraft and Marlayna Pieratt. I looked forward to meeting the name's face.

The hornline would start in the FBI building down the road, requiring a journey in twos. Something felt natural about this method of travel – shoulder to shoulder with another baritone player, tightly following the person in front of me, equipped with a backpack full of audition materials, a black towel tucked in the strap, horn in hand. I hoped to do this more.

Upon arrival, we had a short meeting with our caption head, Ryan Mohney. I learned what it was like to be on the outside of a drum corps inside joke as I observed the vets interact with Ryan. Just the mention of "Bullet Trips" sent the vets and staff into fits of laughter as they relived the 2011 season in front of us. I stood in nervous silence with the other rookies.

Setting the arc, it became clear that the room we were using for rehearsal had been designed with nearly anything in mind but hundreds of anxious hornline auditionees. I ended up shoulder to shoulder with another rookie hopeful from Carmel, Indiana. Dan Smith was a cheerful trombone player with nothing but the highest hopes for everything about the weekend. In drum corps, there are no "normal" relationships, and ours got off to an appropriate start during our first break in rehearsal. He turned to me, eyebrows raised in hopeful interrogation.

"Hey, do you want to stretch arms together?" Our upper bodies were tiring quickly. The easiest relief has always been to join one arm at a time and turn away

from the other person, providing resistance and stretching the sore muscles. I hesitated. We had been standing in an arc for no more than 20 minutes, yet he was glistening with moisture. His blue audition shirt looked black as it became saturated with perspiration, but I couldn't deny a genuine offer for help. As we linked arms, I felt my skin start to absorb his excess sweat. We slid apart as we released our grip. I shuddered. As much as I needed the rest, I feared breaks. I forced myself to embrace this large, sweaty individual that fate had placed next to me.

Friday evening's block stretched on. My arms grew tired and my back surged with pain, yet each passing moment was another moment spent with a World Class hornline. The first downbeat sent shivers down my spine. It was a dirty attack that lacked vertical alignment or a unified sound, but it was a drum corps hornline. For the first time in my life, I was on the giving end of the powerful sound I had come to love as a fan.

The evening rehearsal continued this way – every event a first in my drum corps career. First downbeat, first horn ripple, first missed note, first upper body muscle failure, first show music. Frank Sullivan, the brass arranger, had put together an opener draft for camp that we would play through the rest of the weekend. I recognized quotes from Dvorak's Symphony No. 9 in my part, and I heard how Sullivan had manipulated Dvorak's own creation into something uniquely Blue Stars. Even with less than 30 measures of music, I could start to hear the 2012 Blue Stars production come to life, and it was only Friday night. My rookie enthusiasm was apparent in my awe of a November camp, Friday night first read of a fake opener.

When block ended, I got my first taste of Blue Stars food. I expected cold deli meat sandwiches with cheese and a condiment bar if we were lucky – the type of mass-produced, economically friendly meals I had grown to expect from my summers at music camps like Blue Lake and Interlochen. What I got instead was a full meal with food to spare for seconds. I fought exhaustion as a fragile looking man with blue and blonde hair, ear gauges, and tattoos of fungi covering his arms enthusiastically served up more food than I planned to eat before turning and asking, “More?” I’d soon know Tom Volk as a professor at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse - recognized as one of the top mycologists in the nation and loved as a dedicated volunteer for the corps. Tom and others would serve up some of the best food I had eaten, the product of chef Carlton.

For a rather introverted individual like myself, the most uncomfortable camp experience was the first shower. It’s not often that I look forward to exposing myself completely in front of a group of strangers. I stripped down to my boxers (those I could take off behind the curtains of the private showers), grabbed my soap, and joined the line outside the shower area, waiting in complete silence for a shower to open, trying not to look at anything for too long. Vets would burst in and begin searching for their peers.

“Nacho, is that you?” Somebody would shout from outside a curtain.

“Yeah.”

“You got room to double up?”

“Go for it.”

He would be in and out before any showers opened. I waited in silence, watching as the shower room flooded, soapy water rising above my feet.

After lights out, the men's sleeping area was still busy with activity. Battery potentials padded in groups on the far side near an exit. New members from the back of the line came back from the showers, searching for their bedding in the darkness. I lay in an open spot by a large pole, and I lay on top of my sleeping bag, pillow propped against the cement pillar. I noticed that Dan was lying on the other side of the pole as he talked to a small group of guys. Alan Hill was a peer from Carmel auditioning for lead baritone. Beside him, also auditioning for lead, I recognized Dan Flynn, a trombone player I knew from several shared summers at the Indiana University Summer Music Clinic. I joined their chat, and the three of them became my support group in the corps. During meals or free time, I would find one of those three guys and feel secure in a developing friendship. One by one, conversations died into silence. The sleeping area grew silent. I closed my eyes, hoping to recover as much as possible before a restless Saturday began.

My body burst to life, the silence of unconsciousness shattered by the terrible sound of music pumped through a long ranger.

"Good morning, Blue Stars. It's 7:30. Breakfast is at 8. Rehearsal starts at..." The words jumbled together in my head. My limbs were heavy. My eyelids were heavier. Soreness in my upper body served as a reminder of what I had done the night before and what I had to endure all day – and more tomorrow. Saturday had begun.

The only full day of camp, Saturday served as a structural example of what rehearsal days were like on tour. Before going to sleep that night, I would experience four hours of visual, four hours of brass, and three more hours of brass after a corps meeting. Unsure of how I was going to survive an entire day of physical deterioration, I climbed laboriously up the stairs to the dining area. Looking around, I could tell that I was not alone. With several members still asleep below, those who were awake trudged about the building, their bodies not fully responding to the wishes of their sleepy brains.

When I returned to the FBI building for morning visual, I stacked my horn – my bell continuing a perfect line established by those already there – and joined a collection of members near the center of the room. I hung near the outside, searching for a familiar face or somebody who seemed approachable. I remained there quietly. The inside jokes continued to make me feel isolated. Somebody mentioned the time Danny Jackson, a Ball State student I knew from marching band, got a bloody nose from snapping his tuba mouthpiece into his face the previous season. I wanted to share the story I was told at school about him breaking his face open while attempting a double ninja role, but I wasn't there for that either, and I feared my comment would be ignored. Again, I decided to keep to myself. Sean was moving about the group. I made eye contact with him, giving a look that said, "Well, I'm here!" He gave me a nod of encouragement before returning to the group of tubas that he would soon command as section leader.

I had never worked with a visual staff before, but I knew the guys now entering the building were in charge of us. Besides the jeans, casual attire, and coffee

in hand, they entered with a combined energy and relaxed confidence that commanded my attention. I was ready to adapt to their instruction and prove my worth.

“Let’s get a nice, light jog.” We did as we were told, lead by Chris Kaflik, an athletic, confident looking individual giving instructions between sips of coffee. I ran amongst the members around the crowded room, keeping my eye on the staff in the center, observing their interactions, wanting that type of inclusion. We spread out for stretch, first entering what I would come to know as the “good morning” stretch. As I lay flat on the ground, my hands above my head stretching up, my feet stretching down below me, it may as well have been called the “good night” stretch. I felt tension leaving my body, and I again caught glimpses of the fatigue that I would fight throughout the day.

After an extensive stretch, we transitioned to across-the-floor exercises. Starting with characterizations such as “swimming through a pool of maple syrup,” the staff hoped to observe our creativity, break us of our insecurity, and find the natural performers. I was terrified. I had been in school plays, but those had scripts. Making spontaneous decisions, especially creative ones, had never been something I was good at.

“Next line – go!” My turn to swim through the pool of maple syrup, I looked like most people in the room. I moved in slow motion, fighting the imaginary resistance, looking around awkwardly, hoping for some sort of escape. The natural performers made it seem so simple. A fellow rookie, Chandler Ivory, ended up with his shoe in his mouth, swimming across the floor on his stomach. I enjoyed watching

his display, but I also wished that I could break free from my own insecurities and perform for my peers in the way he did.

Though I struggled with most of the new concepts, I found much greater success in the across-the-floors for dance technique and body awareness. In the middle of a lateral “side, back, side front” exercise, Chris approached me on the move.

“What’s your name?” I had to process his inquiry while still focusing on simultaneous demands such as the turnout of my feet, tempo, and arm shape. After a lengthy delay, I replied, and he disappeared as I finished the exercise and joined the mass of people on the opposite side of the room. Not long after reaching my place in line, I heard my name, and turned to see Chris signaling me to come towards the front. On the floor, I joined three or four others selected to demonstrate what the exercise should look like. In front of several hundred people, rookies and vets, I was highlighted as a model for the first time. After every few exercises, Sean would give me a fist bump, a high five, or some other form of non-verbal encouragement. It felt great to know that somebody was supporting me. His simple actions made me feel welcome in the experience, and I would not soon forget what it felt like to be acknowledged.

As the block continued on, we learned more about isolating parts of our body for movement, applying this information to the marching technique that defined the Blue Stars visual program. Teaching at South Newton, Mr. Stowers had drawn from his influences as an ’88 Bluecoat – Mr. Earnest as a Cavalier. Both had taught a bent leg, bicycle approach to marching. I learned from caption head Ralph Stewart and

his team that I would be using a straight leg technique with the corps. I had been marching with bent knees for 8 years, and I was not prepared for the high-impact nature of a straight leg approach. The ninety-degree turnout at attention felt wrong. I struggled to hold the horn steady. My body hurt. Drum corps was hard, and I was fighting for the chance to do this all summer. I began to recognize the insanity in what I was demanding of myself, a saxophone player who played baritone for three months – an individual whose marching experience consisted of a rural school program of less than 16 winds, determined to join one of the best marching arts organizations in the world. That mentality is exactly what defines the Blue Stars, and while I wasn't aware of it, others were, and somebody noticed.

Lunch was a welcome relief from the rigors of visual. As I continued to learn, every meal Carlton prepared for us was something to look forward to. Chicken nuggets, lasagna, soup and grilled cheese – the variety was endless, and the quality made the idea of being a Blue Star more exciting than it already was. I genuinely looked forward to meals. By that time, I was starving. My body was not used to expending this much energy for as long as doing so was expected of us, and it craved nourishment. Meals were also a chance to recharge mentally. I had just spent the last four hours attempting to absorb and apply as much information as possible, most of which had been foreign before the block. This hour recess was not only necessary for us to function, but it was essential to the educational process, giving the mind a chance to review everything that had happened. For most, the idea was to avoid thinking or exerting themselves physically in favor of consuming as much food and Gatorade as possible.

While I looked forward to eating, I feared the dining area. Once Tom made sure that I had more than enough food, I looked toward the long tables that stretched across the rest of the room – a mass of bodies grouped together, engrossed in conversation – their faces turned towards those they sat with, but not lifting up or looking out with gazes that said “Come, sit.” Vets seemed to congregate by rookie season. I saw the Houdini vets, those I admired the most, close themselves off. Beyond them, members from ReBourne began to mix into new members. As the tables filled, it became more and more difficult to find a seat next to somebody I knew. I searched for Alan or either of the Dans. Failing there, it became a matter of whom I felt the least uncomfortable sitting with. I tagged on to the end of a far table. I ate my food silently, noting the conversations around me, but never joining. I quickly finished the meal and returned to the sleeping area. Collapsing on my sleeping bag, I checked my phone and tried not to think about the next four hours of relentless excellence I was about to attempt.

Brass block began in a similar manner as Friday evening’s rehearsal. We all gathered around Ryan and discussed the goals for the block. Our warmup routine was a mixture of breathing exercises from the Breathing Gym and singing to ensure that we could audiate what we were hoping to play. As performers, we could be more effective if we could sing well, as we would be able to identify our own note accuracy and intonation errors, and Ryan desired to make this a central focus of our brass training. We matched pitch, sang intervals, and sang through brass exercises and chorales - all in an attempt to better hear the desired result before picking up the horn. From the breathing portion of our warmup, I learned that I had never

effectively moved air before as a musician, indicated by my constant lightheadedness and the same specific comments from staff as they monitored our breathing.

“Relax your shoulders. Don’t let them creep up.”

“Make sure you don’t cap your breath. Air should always be in motion.”

“Be sure to change with everybody else.”

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Every so often, I’d hear vets making vague requests for “200 skis.” The tone in their voices told me that they didn’t actually want to do 200 skis and neither should I. In response, we were assured that there would be time for butt kicking, but that would take place later. Returning to the arc, I approached my instrument with caution. I knew that I would need to begin working on my strength and endurance just as much as I worked on my brass playing, but I could do nothing to change my current stamina. I picked up the King baritone, aware of the struggles I would be forced to overcome so I could stick out in a good way.

We began to develop our core sound, the sound that would define the 2012 Blue Stars as an ensemble. Ryan talked about the concepts of the core and aura of a sound. The core was a full moon, the substance of the sound itself – tone, pitch, and playing through the center of the horn. The aura was the moon’s glow, the results of a pure and full-bodied core – resonance, blend, and depth of sound. Without the moon, there is no glow. The glow is the desired product. The moon is how we get there. I was learning that drum corps was much more involved and musically detailed than I thought.

As the block went on, we worked through the brass routine, and staff began pulling members for auditions, starting with vets. I now had to block out the helpless cries of my shaking arms as well as the echoing sounds of audition excerpts to focus on the instructions given. Each time I overheard the baritone technical excerpt, I heard people make the same mistake. I soon realized that what I heard was correct, and that I had learned a phrase with an incorrect key signature. Shortly after this terrifying realization, Daniel Flynn left as the first rookie audition. It was only a matter of time before my turn came. My heart jumped every time somebody returned from the audition room, sending the next in line to have their fate determined. The absurdity of what I was attempting to accomplish again came crashing around me, and as I waited for my audition, I could do nothing but continue to absorb the information taught and show my ability to grow.

Hours went by, and I still hadn't gone. The block ended, and we went to dinner. The nervous anticipation built throughout the meal. Good or bad, I just wanted it to be over so I had no reason for holding on to anxiety. Instead, I rushed through my meal and attempted to relax before the final block of the day and the audition that would determine my member status.

The evening block was structured much like the brass block. The hornline met together and continued to work through the brass routine – with some time set aside for visual work. I was soon approached and pulled from the rehearsal to meet for an interview with Howard Weinstein, the corps director. While a normal part of the audition process, I had no idea what to expect, especially when meeting an individual who helped manage one of the top marching ensembles in the world.

Howard Weinstein was a warm smile that had developed into a full person. He radiated energy with such an intensity that I couldn't help but feel stimulated by his personality. As I sat down to talk with him, I sat down across from an old friend. We started with the basic information. I was a freshman at Ball State studying music education. I had 8 seasons of high school and collegiate marching under my belt. No prior drum corps experience.

"Do you normally play baritone or trombone?"

"Saxophone."

"Me too! I made the same switch you did when I marched Suncoast Sound. This old friend and I were one and the same. I relaxed in his presence, and I felt at home. "So what is it about the Blue Stars that interests you?"

"Location was probably the biggest reason I was able to get here. My parents wouldn't let me audition elsewhere because of distance and travel – you know, '*You can't use your sister's car.*' I was able to get a ride here, and it's close, so I decided to go for it. I really liked *Houdini* – that's when I first considered marching here, and as I looked through the website, I saw that it talked a lot about the educational environment, and I figured that'd be good for me as a future teacher. So yeah – that's kind of how I ended up here...." My voice trailed away into a quiet mumble, a terrible habit triggered by nerves.

"Well, Justin, we're glad to have you here." Howard smiled his large, inviting grin. "How did your audition go?"

"I haven't had it yet."

“Well, best of luck!” He rose, signaling that our conversation was ending. I stood, thanked him for his time, and returned to the brass rehearsal room. Shortly after I took my spot in the arc, Ryan began warm down. The evening block was over. I had survived my first full day of winter camp – but I had not auditioned. I knew the anticipation of the next day’s audition would loom over me all night, but I tried to force that from my mind, focusing instead on the low tones of a proper warm down.

I repeated Friday evening’s events, but now, every move was slower – more laborious. The only thing keeping me from appreciating the warm stream of shower water was the cold pool of rinse water lapping at my ankles. I hoped that this flooding was not a regular occurrence. After a drum corps Saturday, a single sleeping bag on concrete never felt more like a king-sized bed. I tried to check my phone, but I found myself going cross-eyed and dozing off between messages. I surrendered unto sleep, my body numb.

“Good morning, Blue Stars!”

No. There was no possible way that I could make it through the day. My limbs seemed useless. They would not move. My brain and body engaged in a battle – the winner would control my actions. My body resisted. Dressing was slow and difficult. My mind got me to breakfast, but I did more staring at my food than I did eating.

This was Sunday of camp. As the morning picked up, the hornline journeyed once more to the FBI building. The crisp, November air seemed thin and delicate. The sun had not been up for long, and it beamed brightly across the horizon. If there was no other positive in this morning, at least I was up to enjoy the first beautiful moments of the day.

We began in brass. Megan Cornman set the crowded arc. Horn sergeant for the 2012 season, she was responsible for the efficiency of the hornline and for having the arc prepared for the start of rehearsal. She stood in front of us, scanning the arc for imperfections. I knew to do exactly as she instructed out of respect for authority and more than a little intimidation. When the arc was to her standards, we rippled our belongings down. Not clean or quick enough, we repeated this until it was efficient and aesthetically pleasing. This was the demand for perfection in all things that set drum corps apart from any other marching activity.

Ryan brought us in for singing and buzzing. Within minutes of collecting inside the arc, Marlayna Pieratt appeared at the edge of the room, her eyes surveying the group. She pulled me aside.

“Have you auditioned yet?”

“No.”

“Grab your baritone and follow me.” This was it. My heartbeat may as well have tripled. I couldn’t keep track of its wild beating. She told me that I would have about five minutes to warm up for my audition and showed me to the men’s restroom. “Just go in there and we’ll let you know when it’s time.” She left with a smile. I was left with anxiety. I followed the routine as best I could remember. I buzzed on the mouthpiece, played some long tones, fought my way through lip slurs, my Achilles heel, and reviewed the audition excerpts, correcting my mistakes in the technical etude.

Before the five minutes was up, Layney returned to take me to the audition room. I wasn’t ready, but I recognized that an extra couple of minutes could do

nothing for me at this point. I collected my music binder and followed her to a small room adjacent to where the hornline was warming up. On the other side of the wall, I could hear them playing. I hoped they wouldn't be able to hear me.

The man behind the table to evaluate me was the most muscular individual I had ever seen. In contrast to his huge muscles and bulging veins, he looked up with a warm glance and invited me to the room.

"Hi! And you are?"

"Justin Ekstrom."

"Okay, Justin – what would you like to play first?"

"I'll start with the slow etude."

"Mmmk. Whenever you're ready."

Always a perfectionist wishing things could go better, I was pleased with how I performed. It wasn't the best I had played, but I felt very comfortable as I eased into the music. Tackling the technical etude was not as successful. I rushed. A lot. My tongue became heavy and lagged behind the pulse. I missed some of the higher pitches – a sign of my limited range. Even still, it could have easily gone worse. After playing a B-flat major scale (though I failed to even play one octave flawlessly), my adjudicator addressed me.

"You're a trombone player, aren't you?"

"Saxophone, actually."

"Woah – how long have you been playing?"

"About three months."

"You've done that in three months? Is that your baritone?"

“It’s the school’s. I have it for basketball band.”

“Okay. Well, stay in basketball band, okay?”

I assured him that I would, and he thanked me for my time. I returned to the hornline, an immense weight lifted from my shoulders. It was over. After eight years of dreaming and three months of preparation, I had auditioned for a drum and bugle corps. Now, the horn didn’t feel so heavy. Playing wasn’t as cumbersome. Without the fear of the audition, the camp experience was much more enjoyable.

The camp ended with a brief demonstration for parents, volunteers, and visitors of all the things the various sections had worked on during the camp. The hornline followed the colorguard and percussion. I wondered what my parents might think of this whole experience. Part of me wanted to see them in the crowd watching, but I knew they wouldn’t understand the significance of what I had just done.

At the end of the performance, each section was responsible for cleaning a portion of the facilities we had used, and the bari/euphs were in charge of the dining area. While stacking chairs and tables, I reflected on the weekend. I knew I wouldn’t be getting a contract this camp. Vets and new members were signing contracts when I came back from my audition – there hadn’t been enough time for them to make a decision and notify me. I knew I still had my plan to practice brass over the summer, march baritone in the Ball State marching band, and return for the 2013 season. I still had two more months to make improvements, and I was determined to take the feedback I had received all weekend and get a spot by January – if not December.

The four of us from Ball State packed into Aaron's car and began the hour drive back to Muncie. Sean and Jason had both signed on for their third years with the corps – Sean with three more after 2012, Jason preparing to age out. Sean was the first to speak.

"So... did you guys get contracted?"

I scoffed. "Are you crazy? I just started. I wasn't exactly expecting anything."

"No," was Aaron's simple reply.

I shared my plan to wait it out until January. Aaron planned the same. Together, we hoped to get our contracts sooner, rather than later. As we drove on, the car fell silent.

The interstate was lonely – all but empty. A blanket of overcast clouds kept our vehicle company, traveling with us to Muncie. In the back seat, Sean and Jason had long since succumbed to the effects of the first camp. They lay unconscious, unmoving, and unresponsive. Aaron had his eyes fixed on the road ahead. The radio made sound, but I could not process what entered my ears. I forced my eyelids apart, head bobbing – anything I could do to keep Aaron company as he drove us back home. Though we said nothing, I hoped he could sense my lingering consciousness as a sign of support. It seemed to say, *Thank you for driving. Please get us home safely.*

With each passing moment, I drew nearer to the reality of school and life I had escaped for the weekend. Until our arrival, I fought off fatigue. The clouds overhead passed us with ease. Not even their company could last. Isolated and sleepy, we continued home.

Chapter 3: Winter

The following Monday was hard. Moving hurt. Not moving hurt. Pretty much everything was sore and aching, but I endured the pain with pride. I got to talk all day about my experiences from the weekend. At marching band that evening, Aaron and I peppered the Blue Stars' style into rehearsal, standing in a strong open first, our feet forming perfect right angles. We snuck glances at each other and grinned as our stance became more comfortable than the parallel feet of our peers.

That evening, I returned to Sursa and the practice rooms. I still had a month to get better before I hoped to earn my contract. After camp, I had a much better understanding of where the organization was headed and what my weaknesses were, allowing me to be more focused and efficient with my practicing. I continued to expand my range, improving the upper register of the horn while strengthening the lower register. I liked playing low. It felt more comfortable, and I sounded better. I set my sights on 3rd euphonium.

My routine continued this way. By day, I was a freshman music education major at Ball State University playing saxophone. By night, I was a drum corps hopeful, faithfully committed to earning a contract with The Blue Stars. I packed the baritone for my trip home over Thanksgiving Break.

Back home, I excitedly showed my parents my developing skills on the instrument. They listened to my demonstrations with feigned enthusiasm, knowing they had no choice. I was playing a marching baritone in a house – they were going to hear it. This was the most we had discussed drum corps since our phone conflicts. It seemed as though they had forgotten, or at least had given in to my ambition. If

they hadn't realized how dedicated I was to this dream, it was clear as I spoke non-stop about my previous weekend. I enjoyed that break. College had not treated me well to start, and being home was a welcome relief. I visited the high school and met with Mr. Earnest for help. We spent more time talking about the activity than we did about the fundamentals of brass playing, but it was a relief to talk to somebody who could hold a conversation about drum corps. When my time at home had expired, I headed back to Muncie, ready to resume my nights in the practice room.

The solitary evening walks to Sursa had become as habitual as checking my phone – a habit that bordered obsessive. One evening, my phone vibrated, and I was surprised to see a friend request from Howard Weinstein on Facebook. You wouldn't friend request somebody you planned to cut and send home, would you? I accepted his request, pocketed my phone, and hunkered down for another late-night practice session.

Hours later, I arrived back at my dorm, mentally exhausted and generally fatigued – no different than a regular night of homework. My lips were still tingling from the mouthpiece. In the mass of emails competing for my attention, Howard Weinstein caught my eye. I eyed the subject line before incredulously opening his message.

Congratulations – Blue Stars 2012

Justin,

Congratulations! You have been awarded a performance position with the 2012 Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps. This is an incredible accomplishment as we had a great amount of talent audition for the organization....

...If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at the information listed below.

Welcome to the Blue Stars!

Howard Weinstein, Corps Director
Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps

I read the message over and over, each time looking for information I must have missed – something about a callback or a future contract. Surely I was misinterpreting Howard's message. I was not.

A grin spread wide across my face. I shot from my chair and ran down the hall to my sister's room, which happened to be on the same floor. I needed to tell everybody - anybody who would listen. I knocked on her door. No answer. I checked the handle. Locked. Needing to share my news, I ran back to my room and created a new status on Facebook. "Only one word can describe how excited I am right now. Contract!"

For the rest of the evening, words of encouragement, support, and congratulations from my peers poured in. I was at a new high, and nothing could bring me down. After eight years of watching from the stands, I was going to join the 2012 Blue Stars on the field. I imagined the stories I'd get to tell, the long summer, and the roar of the crowd on Finals night. The contract was just the beginning of an experience I could not yet comprehend, but it was everything I could have ever wanted.

The next weeks flew by, and I found myself back in Indianapolis for December camp. As a contracted member, I felt an incredible weight lifted from my shoulders. I had planned to fight for a spot in December, maybe even January. Now, I

could enjoy the experience of getting better under the direction of the instructional staff without the anxiety of wondering whether my efforts would pay off. I returned to my pillar in the men's sleeping area, finding Dan and Alan's things. It was great to have them there. A compulsive creature of habit, their presence established a sense of normalcy. I dropped my things and headed to the main desk for check-in. Now contracted for one of the 20 euph spots, I received a corps horn to use, replacing my 5.5 lb King baritone with a 7.6 lb Jupiter Quantum euphonium. Taking it out of the case, it was noticeably heavier, but it was not uncomfortable to hold, and my tone was better on the larger bore. I was ready for success.

Visually, Ralph had promised us in November an exercise that would mimic opener fatigue. It was continuous figure-8 box drill (a forward/left box followed by a forward/right box) at 180 bpm for three minutes with horns in playing position. He made good on his promise. As we set up on the grid to begin, I positioned myself behind a particular vet whom I was convinced didn't like me due to shared out-of-corps encounters. For my own pride and as a chance to prove myself, I planned to outperform him. Staff called us to set, and after eight clicks from the met we began. The first minute was easy. I floated along through the technique, nailing my foot placements and direction changes. My eyes were fixed on the vet in front of me, waiting for any indication that he had failed to train in the off-season. That was when I hit the wall. Less than halfway through the three-minute exercise, I suddenly became aware of how heavy the horn was. My arms were shaking, and I focused more on that than on anything else. It wasn't long before my technique deteriorated. My legs were burning, shins on fire. I fought a losing battle to keep my toes up. My

breathing became quick and shallow as I went into physical overload. With over a minute to go, the exercise became a fight for survival. My feet shuffled across the floor. Technique was no longer a concern. I had to keep my feet moving. I shoved the horn against my chest for extra support, struggling still to keep the horn in place. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, and I saw the vet in front of me moving well, his euphonium still at playing position. The exercise continued on. How long could possibly be left? I was falling behind the form. My bell dipped below parallel with little hope of me returning it to its proper place. Finally, everything ended. Breathless and aching, I knew that I had failed. If this was drum corps, I was not ready.

In music, Ryan introduced us to an exercise he called *F Around the Room*.

"Yes, I'm asking you to F – around," he joked. "We'll set the met, eight clicks, then go, as usual. The exercise starts down at the end of the arc with Breitzke. He'll play for four counts then release, and Chia will take over. He'll sustain for four counts, release, and the entire process moves through the arc. When we get to Mike at the end of the baritones, I'll cue the tubas, and we'll start with Sean and work our way down to the end. Everybody will sustain together after the last tuba. Are there any questions?"

"Horns?"

"You'll just bring your horn up before your turn. Just make sure you're looking ahead and you're ready and know when it's your time to play."

Breitzke and Chia were both entering their fourth year in the corps – a small representation of rookies from The Factory. Their horns came up, and Dr. Beat

clicked its distinct, high-pitched beeps – the tone that haunts thousands of marchers each summer. Concert F traveled down the line of trumpets. With each individual, I could hear differences in tone quality, intonation, note starts, releases, and duration. The exercise was often stopped so that Ryan and other staff members could point out these inconsistencies.

The purpose of the exercise was for the staff to get a detailed, person-to-person understanding of how each person played while also challenging our ears. We were supposed to hear the person before us, conceptualize their sound, and then match it. Failure to immediately match or correct your pitch would indicate a lack of listening or an inability to make adjustments, both undesirable. After interruptions and explanations, we would start again. Over and over, Breitzke and Chia would get set and play. Over and over, we stopped down the line. Most often, we stopped for gaps between players.

“I want you to think *brick*.” A lean, confident tech stepped forward to address us. He exuded an energy that pressed into me and commanded my focus. “The brick is the perfect representation of your air stream.” He walked over to the wall and smacked it with his hand. “Just look at them. You’re in a room full of bricks. Pick one. Notice the perfectly rectangular shape. That’s your note. It doesn’t start thin and grow into the full brick size. There are no gaps. It starts full, continues, and ends with another clean line. That’s your air. The thin strip of mortar between each brick is your tongue. The mortar doesn’t *destroy* the bricks, it simply *separates* them. Assuming you play for the full four counts and release your brick on the downbeat, the next person’s brick starts, and the two meet. There’s no space. There’s no

silence, just one continuous brick of concert F.” We continued this exercise for most of the evening. Unlike the trumpets on the end of the arc, I only played once. My note responded late, swelled into the sustain, and the pitch shot up on the release - a horrible first impression.

After brass, Mike called the bari/euphs together for a party. Horn holding parties exist to keep each other accountable – to see who has and who has not put in the time between camps to get stronger – and consist of various upper body exercises and simply holding the horn, hence the name. I’m convinced that *party* is added in an attempt to trick members into enjoying masochism. The lean, “brick” tech entered the center of the circle we had created. I came to know him as Brian Fischer, the bari/euph music tech. He explained to us that in an ideal world, he wanted the left arm, the weight-bearing arm, to be beefy and muscular. The right arm could be a tiny chicken wing so long as we could press the valves in time. With this in mind, we focused on strengthening the left arm. Having reached muscle failure in the visual drill, these simple workouts destroyed my stamina and morale. It was Friday night, and I was already fatigued. Euphonium sucked.

The next day in brass after breathing and singing, we focused more on *F Around the Room* before breaking into sub-sectionals, or subs. I stood there, scanning the arc, enjoying the rest from the horn. Concert F passed from person to person, those down the line looking anxiously ahead to the members playing. My eyes followed the note's path across the arc. Most individuals were standing casually, relaxed at low, waiting for their turn. There was a trumpet player who caught my eye. She stood perfectly erect. Even at low, an intensity shone from her

persona. In contrast to the relaxation around her, she looked like a machine. My gaze kept returning to this trumpet across the arc. Her posture was unfailing - her stern face showed a discipline taken seriously. It was a model for perfection. And she was cute.

In subs, we got a completely new opener, not a revision of the Dvorak from last month. It was mostly white notes – sustained pitches with little motion. As we began to work through it as a section, I just heard chords, but not music. I missed the aesthetic of the old opener. The piece on the stand in front of me was boring garbage. I knew how often shows could change over the summer, but I had already gotten attached to a design. This new piece of music bothered me for the same reason I needed to sleep by the same pillar each night – I was a creature of habit that feared the new and unknown. I was afraid of change.

Despite my frustrations with the music, the issue I couldn't overcome was the weight of the euphonium. Halfway through Saturday, I was struggling hold it. My left arm had all but given up strength, and I was forced to find creative ways to keep the horn in place with my right hand. This put a great deal of pressure on my thumb, wedged between the first and second valve casing. To balance it out, I shoved my pinky as far into the pinky ring as possible and used it to support the horn. As the bell began to drop, my pinky supported it. This kept pressure on my finger whenever the horn was up, and I lost feeling in it. It developed a grotesque callous and changed color, but I ignored the damage and did what was needed to avoid breaking – putting the horn down when it is supposed to be up to briefly rest the arms. I did a lot of shaking.

Saturday evening, I was contacted by Matt Schneider, a vet in his second year who had sprained his ankle at school – and my ride home from camp for Christmas Break. He had spent most of camp in a chair and needed to leave early on Sunday for medical reasons. I silently cheered, knowing that I would spend less time fighting the metal I was trying to master. Little by little, the ambient sounds of the sleeping area died into silence as members succumbed to their fatigue. I gave in to my heavy eyelids, hoping the rest would be enough to get me through my abbreviated day when I woke up.

As was tradition, I was startled awake by the sounds of music pumped over the Long Ranger.

“Good morning, Blue Stars!” The pain and stiffness was worse today than it had been in November. I let my body mindlessly get me to where I needed to go. Stairs. Food. Table. Eat. Stairs. Clothes. Change. Stairs. Equipment. Stairs. Rehearsal.

Every moment my horn was up, I thought about getting to leave after lunch. The weight continued to wreak havoc on my upper body. My pinky had turned a dark blue and sent sharp pains throughout my hand and forearm. In brass, we focused on working through the new opener, but never in chunks large enough for me to judge its content. I still hated it.

I left that camp with Matt and his dad, aware that if I had stayed, I would have been broken by the horn. The last few minutes in rehearsal had been unbearable. My left arm could support nothing. My right pinky had been bent out of place, rendering it useless. My whole body shook with muscle failure. On our way out of Indianapolis, I examined my finger, now a light purple, torn, and calloused. It

was two hours from the fairgrounds to my house, and I used that time to learn about the corps from Matt's perspective, gathering more stories from the year before. I grew more and more excited to be marching this season, wondering what stories I would have to tell this time next year.

I woke up early to run. Dan Heath, a vet with military training had encouraged us to get started on a physical fitness plan so our bodies would be ready for the summer. I didn't have access to a gym, weights, or other equipment, but I could run. A light snow had fallen the night before, and the air was still thin and brittle. It burned my lungs. I dressed in layers, wrapped a scarf around my face, and set off down my lonely country road on a four-mile route. I forced my feet to keep moving, thinking back to how quickly I had failed during the visual drill at camp. This early-morning run was making it clear the level of self-discipline I would need to be prepared for the summer, and so I pushed through the biting air of late December so that I might succeed in the heat of July.

The time between camps stretched on. In addition to fitness, I continued to spend much of my spare time practicing. I had made my first tour payment and was able to take home my euphonium, allowing me to practice on the instrument I would be marching. Each month, Ryan gave us music assignments. Members had used SmartMusic before, but Ryan preferred not to have us buy anything else, especially after discussing the possibility of purchasing Hammond mouthpieces for the season. Instead, we recorded assignments on CDs and turned them in at the next camp for evaluation. I had never gotten feedback from my December CD, but continued to

address the issues I heard in my own sound regarding articulations, tone quality, and lip slurs.

Lip slurs were nearly impossible for me. I could somewhat accurately slur down between partials, but returning to upper partials was a constant struggle, made more difficult by my still limited range. Being self-taught, I had no concepts for how to approach this – what my face should do, how I should use my air, or where my tongue needed to go. I found a somewhat inconsistent success with raising my eyebrows, tightening my lips, and hoping for the best. I still was not pleased with my articulations, either. My note starts were fuzzy and often splattered. Sometimes notes wouldn't speak at all. Ryan had assigned articulation exercises at various tempos for our January CD. With so many problems needing my attention, my practicing was soon determined by which assignments needed recording, my focus going to those techniques.

Back in Indianapolis for January camp, I was ready for another weekend of drum corps. Friday night, Mike and Fischer led another horn holding party. I had put in my fair share of time with the euphonium over break, and I was confident I would be okay. Again, I found myself struggling. Several times Fischer instructed us to remove our right hands from the horn, holding with just the left arm. I immediately felt the burn of muscle fatigue. For ten minutes, Fischer worked us through several exercises. We ended with a minute of holding the horn with the left arm only. My bell dropped toward the ground. I used my right hand to bring it back to its proper place, only to watch it drop when I removed my right hand. There was nothing I could do but watch it fall. My left arm had failed. Again, I was unprepared for the

expectations placed upon me. I went to bed that night frustrated, hoping things would soon change for the better.

The next morning, we continued to detail our visual approach, becoming pickier with our technique and adding an emphasis of dance into our movement program. It was clear during our across the floor exercises that I had never been trained to move in such a way. Ralph, Chris, and the rest of the visual team explained that they wanted the 2012 Blue Stars to be known not just by how clean our drill and technique was but by how well we moved our bodies. With a talent like Michael Shapiro creating a brilliant guard, the hornline should move just as well. I was bombarded with vocabulary that meant nothing to me – *tendue*, *coupé*, *en croix*, *ronde de jambe*, and *temps lie*. I put an action to each word, but my actions were awkward and uncoordinated. I had more to work on.

We were confined to the FBI building, so with limited space, we did a lot of work in subs. Fischer worked with the bari/euphs on airflow and bricks of sound. We modified *F Around the Room* for subs, getting pickier about note starts and how we released. The brass staff didn't want us clipping the notes with our tongues or doing anything out of the ordinary with our embouchures at the time of the release. The conceptual framework used was *Stop, Low, Still*. It implied that we were to *stop* our air *low* in the diaphragm, the source of the airflow, and keep all things *still* in the process. Doing so would allow our tone to resonate, filling the performance venue with our aura.

Fischer went down the line, making brief comments after each person had played their concert F. Each time, I listened to the sound and the comments, hoping

to create a database of outcomes and suggestions so that I could learn from the mistakes of others. The exercise got to Christina Scocchera, a girl a year younger than me, but a vet in her second year. Her sound was at least a full dynamic under the examples before her. Fischer stopped the met.

“Christina. Use more air. We are not going to do this all summer again.” I stood, not knowing how to react. I knew how much I hated being called out, but I felt relieved knowing that I was not the only person struggling with technique issues.

Frank was at camp to introduce the show. We had waited to hear the full idea from Shapiro, but something had come up, and he was unable to be there. Not wanting to keep us in the dark, Frank explained the concept.

“The show this summer is all about the ocean – water, sailors, sharks, storms, treasure, anything you could think of with the sea. The opener you have is actually from the new Robin Hood movie, but most of the show is based on Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*. We’re calling it *The Blue World*.” He grinned. “See what we did there?” He played us the MIDI file of what had been written so far. I heard the opener come to life. I heard Dvorak as drum corps, and it was awesome. We were asked to keep quiet about what we knew until the corps made an official show announcement. It was going to be hard. I was hyped for this show.

When camp was over, the bari/euph cleaning assignment was to pull the taped grid off the floor. No piece seemed to stay together for more than a few inches at a time before shredding into small slivers, requiring long fingernails and patience for picking at its torn edges. This seemed to go on for hours. Other members completed their tasks and left or caught shuttles to the airport, flying to warmer

places. Soon, there were just a handful of members in the rehearsal space. I remained, patiently picking tape off the concrete. Fischer stood in the center of the room, answering questions. The trumpet I had noticed in December walked towards him. He turned, and they began to talk. I got up and walked towards Fischer, thinking of a question I could ask him on the way. I hovered near the edge of their conversation as they wrapped up. It turned out she was one of his students.

"Thanks, Lizzie." Fischer turned, looking at me. "What can I do for you?" I froze.

"Um... will you be here next camp?"

"I'm planning on it." He eyed me, expecting more.

"Cool." I returned to my line of tape. I had learned a lot this camp. I learned about proper airflow. I learned more about thinking brick and listening to those around me. I learned that her name was Lizzie.

I was not completely alone in my efforts to get better. After camps, Mike Villano had been the recipient of many of my Facebook messages regarding brass fundamentals, and as uncomfortable as I felt sending them (at a point, you just start to feel ignorant and annoying), he answered quickly and supportively. I felt as though he cared about my success at a personal level, and it was nice to have somebody help guide me in the right direction. We learned that both of us would be volunteering at the IMEA convention in Fort Wayne the weekend after camp. I used the event as an opportunity to get to know Mike and his corps history and experiences. It was evident he enjoyed teaching and sharing his knowledge. He answered each of my questions with detailed examples and exercises to help

develop the techniques in question, brass and visual alike. Mike became a mentor and role model. I wanted to be like him – to follow in his footsteps, creating my own Blue Stars history.

It was Christina with whom I first discussed the corps motto. We had begun messaging between camps, and I started to learn her corps story. I felt less intimidated by her than other vets. I admired and looked up to many of the members and leadership – Mike, Jason, Dan Heath, Mark, and Zack Crissman (who absolutely terrified me) – but Christina was approachable. I had always seen Jason add *FCO* to his posts online, it was displayed on all the merchandise, yet I was clueless about what it was.

“So I know it’s the corps motto, but what exactly is *FCO*?”

“It’s short for *Finis Coronat Opus*, which translates into *The End Crowns The Work*. It’s the idea that every action of yours affects the season’s outcome. The end, finals, is a direct reflection of the work you put in from the moment you started preparing for the season.”

“And when do new members start using it?”

“Definitely not before spring training, but I don’t know. The vets just say it because it’s natural, and the new members kind of pick up on it. You’ll know. It’ll just feel right.” I was even more mystified by the saying. I now knew what it was, but I hadn’t experienced what it meant. With a contract, I was technically a Blue Star, but there was so much of what it meant to be a Blue Star that I was not. There was still a world within the corps I had no access to. It would take 4 weeks of rehearsal in Iowa

and Wisconsin to forge me into a member of marching music's elite. Until then, I refrained from saying it.

We lost Howard in March. At our corps meeting on Friday night, I noticed a new face lingering amongst the other staff and administration. Bearded and balding, he stood, quietly watching as Howard informed us that he would not be able to go on tour with us this summer. Instead, Russ Gavin would be taking over the role of Corps Director, overseeing our daily actions. Russ stepped forward to introduce himself, explaining that he was a euphonium player. There were cheers from my section. I remained silent. Russ had joined the corps in 1993 and had most recently been on the board of directors. He was excited to be taking over as corps director, but I was terrified of such a dramatic change. Howard was part of the environment I had become comfortable in, and now I was being told that a stranger would be in charge from now on. My obsessive need for consistency was being challenged.

We started setting drill in April. Field lining crew had chalked a field for our use on the parking lot. It was a mess of parking spaces and thin, crooked chalk lines, but it served its purpose. Visual staff had us work backwards from the most recent material they had received, getting us to and through our first major impact. Setting drill was slow going, but it was still a fast-paced environment. Everybody ran everywhere – resets, new sets, water breaks. I liked it.

The drill was hard. With only a few camps addressing the technique, all but two of my sets required jazz running, some backwards. I was running between reps, I was running during reps, and I was getting tired. I refused to show weakness, the

fear of being seen as a weak link motivating my legs to keep running – my lungs burning in the cold, April air, my heart sending rapid pulses throughout my body. Mike had been giving us regular horn-holding videos to complete, and it was showing. I was no longer struggling to keep the instrument up. Each chunk lasted about 30 seconds long, followed by a brief “field” time in which field techs could make comments, but most importantly in which I could put down the horn. Factoring in resets, the rehearsals were paced so I could continue to hold the horn.

Saturday morning passed, set by set. It was an exhilarating feeling, putting the 2012 production on the field, even though after stretching and basics we were only able to learn 8 sets. There was a pathway issue between one of my jazz running sets and a dot for Ian Jeffrey, a rookie tuba, slowing down rehearsal. Even so, the main point was learning the rehearsal technique so that when we got the full opener and revisions in May we could learn more efficiently.

Walking in twos to lunch, we talked amongst ourselves about the drill and about corps life as a whole. My two, a rookie much younger than I was, asked me about my future with the corps.

“Do you think you’ll age out here?” I thought about his question.

“I mean... I don’t know what’ll happen. I don’t even know if I’ll make it through spring training, but I don’t see why I wouldn’t stay. It’s like... when you march somewhere you learn how they do things. It makes sense to just come back and make the corps better with the things you learned.”

“I don’t know... I’ll probably march this season then go to Cavies and age out there.” I was silent. It was April camp. The season hadn’t started, and the kid beside

me had already determined that the corps he was training with at that moment wasn't deserving of his long-term commitment (a quick Facebook search indicates that he followed through with his dream). I hoped to be different. I truly didn't know if I'd make it through the season, but I had no intention of marching elsewhere.

On May 18, I sat in the back of the car as my parents drove down I-65, taking me to the Walmart parking lot where a charter bus would take members of the corps to Forest City, Iowa, the site of the first half of spring training. With me was a suitcase, sleeping bag, pillow, bus box for under my seat, and all my rehearsal gear. For the next 86 days, I would live with only those items and a couple hundred dollars of spending money. Each minute on the road brought me miles closer to forfeiting my independence for the summer, my anxiety growing. We pulled into the parking lot, securing a space on the outskirts, far enough away from the store that no other cars parked nearby. There was no bus to be seen, and so we sat in silence. In the uncomfortable quiet, with no engine hum to serve as a background, I could hear my heartbeat, the blood rushing past my ears.

Watching the people of Walmart enter and exit the store, I spotted familiar faces outside a nearby car. Alan and Dan stood stretching. I went over to greet them, and we left to kill time in the store, picking up last-minute necessities. We found those necessities in the form of branded hats and shirts sold by M&M for the Indy 500 festivities. Grouped by color and character, the three of us decided to be "those guys," purchasing the ridiculous merchandise. I got a hat for the blue M&M, Alan grabbed orange, and Dan purchased the matching shirt for his sexy green lady M&M.

“Bus is here.” I read the text from my dad, my nerves returning to uncomfortably high levels. I left the store to find a collection of familiar faces and their parents – eagerly trying to help but just getting in the way. With only one charter bus and no equipment trailer, a large game of Tetris began as members stacked instruments, suitcases, and other large items in the bays. It became clear that much of the items would be riding up top with us. When all was said and done, there was little room for comfort.

It was time to leave. I approached my parents apprehensively. I was going to miss them, but I tend to have the social awareness of a chair. I would have preferred to get on the bus and drive away, never addressing my emotions or dealing with goodbyes. This was to be the longest I’d been gone from home, however, so I knew my parents deserved my attention, uncomfortable or not. My mother teared up immediately, and we embraced for quite some time. My dad, whom I got my emotional interactions from, gave me a firm, long hug – a rarity. I could tell that he was anxious about my summer as well, he was just too proud to show it. I knew I was going to miss them, but I had missed them each time I left for music camps, and I always came back glad I had gone. I knew this would be the same, just longer.

Like a ship setting sail, the bus rolled into motion, family members waving to their children who sat inside. I watched my parents disappear, their gazes following the windows, searching for where I sat. I pulled out my phone and sent a message to my mom with the only words I had to say. “Thanks for letting me do this.”

The trip would take over nine hours, including food stops. An excitement electrified the bus as we talked to one another, sharing stories from previous camps,

hearing old stories from veteran members, and telling more than enough raunchy jokes to get us comfortable with one another. I sat with Dan. Alan sat nearby across the aisle. We wore our hats enthusiastically, despite several incredulous looks.

"Guys, I thought of a name!" Dan tilted his head, confused.

"For what?"

"For us!" I paused, letting the suspense build. "The Three M&M-eteers!" Dan stared at me, blinking.

"Wow..." His voice trailed off. Alan said what they were both thinking.

"That is probably the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"It's too late, Alan," I replied. "It's who we are." All the while, the bus drove us closer to Forest City, to spring training, and to the most challenging and eventful summer I have endured.

Chapter 4: Spring Training

“Statistics show that two people in this room will not make it through spring training.” Russ stood, addressing the corps. “Either they do something stupid like not drink enough water, or they realize, ‘Hey, maybe this isn’t for me after all’ – one way or the other, two people will leave here before moveins are over.” He paused, eyeing each person in the room. “Don’t be one of those people.”

The corps was packed in the small recital hall at Waldorf College. We had arrived in Forest City just an hour before. It was late, and rehearsal began at eight o’clock the next morning, but there were several announcements that needed to be made, requiring a corps meeting. As Russ gave us the information we would need to be successful, I thought back to March when I hated him simply because he was new. As it turned out, Russ was the perfect complement to my own personality. A foil to my restless perfectionism, Russ has the key ability to assess a situation and calmly identify the problem, offer suggestions, and see to a solution – all without losing his pleasant sense of humor. I was looking forward to spending my summer under his direction.

Russ walked us through the next two and a half weeks. We were guests of Forest City and of Waldorf College. The small town had never had an event like this happen. 150 young adults would be flooding the streets every morning to journey from the dorms to the rehearsal field. For two and a half weeks, we were on display for all to see. Some would take this literally with their choices of attire. Anybody in the town would be able to recognize us as Blue Stars. Our actions, thus, must reflect the organization and what it stands for.

"I will treat you like adults until you give me a reason not to." With this, Russ dismissed us. I returned with Dan and Alan to the room we shared in Tanner Hall. Opting for the floor, I inflated my air mattress and wedged it between the two beds, pushing aside suitcases and instruments. It was going to be a tight fit for the three of us, but we would only be there at night, and we only needed enough space to collapse into an unconscious exhaustion. We had just enough. The three of us settled in for the last comfortable night of sleep we would get for the summer. Eight o'clock rehearsal meant breakfast at seven and waking up in time to walk to the field. I set my alarm for 6:30 and hoped for as much sleep as I could get.

The energized closer to *Houdini* startled me awake. I silenced the alarm, the room filling with the warm glow of the sun as it rose somewhere over Forest City. There was a sleepy hesitation in the room. None of us wanted to leave our current comfort to face the reality of spring training, but we had invested too much into this experience to remain languid. We dressed in silence. I had a conversation in my head. *Are you ready for this?* I'm not sure. *Do you have everything?* Backpack, music, towel, instrument, gloves. I was as ready as I could be. *Let's do this!* Yes, let's.

I started my journey to the field. *Water jug!*

"Oh, shit!" I returned to the room to find my water jug sitting behind the door. Now paranoid, I double-checked my bag to be sure I had everything. I was missing sunscreen. Good start.

Outside, the streets were dotted with individual corps members, each trekking up and down the hills as they headed to the field. As I reached the summit of the Iowa hills we were forced to climb, I could see the cook truck by the field.

Some small dots of members were already at breakfast. They came from all directions. It was the great migration of Blue Stars toward our own little Mecca. Each morning for the next eighteen days, I would make this trip equipped with everything needed for a full day of rehearsal. I would return to the dorm only after our 16-hour day ended.

Breakfast was simple. Oatmeal, eggs, sausages, fruit, and a selection of cereal – just enough to get us going before visual, but not enough that we’d throw up during PT (or so I hoped). It was a beautiful morning. As I finished my bargain bag Captain Crunch, I watched the sun rise higher in the cloudless sky. I immediately applied sunscreen. Returning to the stack, Jack Huber was carefully moving horns.

“Don’t worry, guys. Stack Master Jack is here to save the day!” Dave Foth, another third-year ageout continued with clever comments about Jack’s efforts to correct the less-than-perfect stack. Each comment received laughter.

“Well, look at it,” Jack replied, flustered. “It’s turning into a curve.” He wasn’t wrong. Somewhere along the line, one of the twenty euphoniums had set their horn down at a slight angle. Over time, as others stacked against that horn, the error was magnified. Horn by horn, Jack and others corrected the stack.

“Wow, good job baritones! Look at that straight line.” Mike complimented his stack more as an indirect taunt than a commendation. He turned to address the euphoniums.

“But no, really – that’s terrible. Don’t let that happen again.”

As Jack continued to work, the visual staff dispersed from where they stood at the center of the field. Chris addressed the high brass on side one. They moved toward us. As Chris neared, I could start to make out his commands.

“Aaaaand we’re walking! Take a lap.” His finger drew circles in the air, signaling us to begin. Once complete, we took another, this time “a nice, light jog.” This continued with various dynamic stretches, preparing us for the rigorous day ahead. After several laps, Chris brought us in to address the corps.

“Good morning! How is everybody?” In response, he got a few feigned cheers and a Foth joke. Lively and smiling, he reminded me of an energized racehorse waiting for the gate to open so he could take off down the track, likely the result of the coffee he kept in hand. “That’s cool, that’s cool. Okay, so – here’s the deal.” He gestured to a lone windmill in the distance, spinning in the light breeze. Lit at night, it was one of the first things I noticed when we arrived in Forest City. “One of these days, we’re gonna’ take a trip and touch that. Today, what we’re gonna’ do is line up in the endzone and do a ten-minute run. You’ll run down the goal line, and when you get to the back sideline, you’ll turn and come up the five yard line. Then you’ll turn and run down the ten. Keep doing that, and when you run out of lines, loop around the back sideline and start again. Keep running until we tell you to stop, cool?” We were cool. I was confident I could do this. I had completed a four-mile run in preparation for tour, and that took well over ten minutes. Somewhere in the monotony of running up and down yardlines, I lost my motivation to keep moving. I had done most of my training in the climate-controlled rec center at Ball State. Now outside, the sun beating down on my pale, ginger skin, there were many other

variables at play. A straightforward ten-minute run became a challenge. When was I going to get good at this?

I chugged water between heavy breaths before grabbing my horn and running back out to the field for basics. Erik Burch took us through several of our stationary exercises. 50/50 developed proper weight distribution and upper body motion on count one. Point/neutral/flex established the correct foot shape when marching backwards. We also used an exercise I was terrible at - Up 4/Down 4. It started in turnout. With the met, we lifted our left foot off the ground, raising it, pointed, up the inside of the right leg until we reached the knee on count four. The next four counts brought the foot down, and the right foot took over. It was all about controlling the body through time and space, lifting, engaging the core, transferring weight through each part of the foot, and doing everything so that there was no sway during the exercise. For many of us, it was impossible.

Try to eliminate that sway. Engage the core. Get that sway out of there! The staff comments were relentless. I just wanted to march. I didn't get why we had to do this. The horn was heavy in my hands. I tried to focus on the vocals. *Up - and - off, dut dut dut dut down, two, three, touch - roll, up - and - off...* and so the morning went.

The drill we had learned in April was just a small sample of our visual package, created by Myron Rosander, the mind behind some of the greatest visual performances by the Santa Clara Vanguard and two of their DCI titles. We reviewed revisions for those sets - I was no longer colliding with Ian Jeffrey, which was great, because I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about colliding with a tuba all season.

“Go find set 10,” Ralph commanded from the box. I flipped through my dot book. *2 out Side 2 15; 16 front BS*. I was the furthest dot in the form. The instructors were barely audible as they worked with others at the center of the field. I watched cars slow as they passed the field, observing the strange group of kids who had taken over their town. They would get used to our presence. We rose with the sun and rehearsed until well after sunset; our days began as people drove to work, and as they drove home at the end of the workday, we still had four hours of rehearsal. I watched these cars and wondered what the people inside them thought of me.

With the remaining time in visual, we finished most of the opener. Setting drill was a slow, methodical process that left me with my thoughts. Look at the new set. Go find it. Stand in the dot. Wait for staff to make adjustments. Turn and face the old dot. March to it. Turn and face the new dot. March to it. Reset. March to the new dot with show facing. Repeat as needed. Look at the new set. Go find it....

Lunch was fast approaching. I could smell the food volunteers in the cook truck had been preparing since the end of breakfast. I wondered what we’d be eating. It smelled like chicken. Chicken patties? Nuggets? Fries? Maybe the chicken was part of a salad or something.

“Set!” Mark Donahue’s voice carried from the podium, bringing me back to rehearsal. I stood at attention, ready to run the drill we had set that afternoon – sets six through nineteen. It was an exhilarating rush of jazz running, direction changes, and reading forms. I loved it.

“Go run.” After Megan set the arc for brass rehearsal, Ryan immediately brought us in and began yelling. Of the two music assignments that were due before we arrived at spring training, a large number of members had neglected to do them. In this activity, you are united with your peers at all times. If one person misses a release in a show, the entire hornline – hell, the entire corps suffers. If we were to grow together, we had to suffer together, and so on day one, I sprinted to a variety of objects we were told to touch because of the carelessness of others.

After track practice, we began our standard warmup of breathing and singing. The slow, relaxed inhale of the Sun Goddess felt great as the temperature rose. We were lucky, though. The temperature was holding in the upper 80’s. The focus of breathing was on constant motion of the air – either in or out, like shifting a car from reverse to fourth gear immediately with no pause between. Hopefully we could survive the whiplash.

Ryan gave us a concert F drone and began to hum, motioning for us to do the same. I had never considered a technique for humming, and neither had many others. He cut us off, instructing us to think about opening our oral cavity, giving our sound more room to resonate.

“I want you all to hum like you normally would. Now, open your mouth and separate your teeth – try to get as much room between them as you can without separating your lips.” I felt my entire head and sternum resonate. The change must have been audible within the ensemble. Ryan grinned, turning to the other staff, seeking their approval. He motioned for us to sing, opening up to an *Ah*. His grin quickly changed to a grimace.

“Jesus, you guys are sharp.”

“Well it *is* hot out...” Alan Hill, everybody.

The focus for brass block was to continue developing our ensemble brass sound. We did several hours of fundamentals in the handbook before splitting into subs to get more detailed and start polishing the show music that corresponded to the sets we put on the field that morning. The hornline would regroup for the end of the block, marching and playing the new material so we would be ready to add percussion and colorguard in ensemble.

In subs, I learned more about Aaron Goldberg, one of our baritone techs, the euphonium professor at Boston University, and an incredibly witty person.

“I’ll tell you what – for every car that honks at us, *go band*, we’ll do ten pushups!” That sounded like a terrible deal. That same block, we did ten “victory pushups” to celebrate a job well done. Aaron took the small details seriously. He told us about his first Crossmen camp. The first night, they didn’t play. They practiced horn ripples and posture. He used his wit to shape us.

“Who has an A-flat at letter D?” A few lower split seconds raised their hands lazily. “No. It’s either *Yes, I want one million dollars*,” his arm was fully extended, reaching into the air, “or *No, I don’t want to be kicked in the nuts*,” his arm immediately dropped to his side. “None of that vague crap.” He left a few days later but gave us one last heartfelt goodbye.

“You know, guys, I love you, but sometimes love hurts. Put ‘em up.” Our horns stayed in playing position until he entered a van 200 yards away – but not before hugging every other member of the hornline. We suffered together. It seemed like

every day in Forest City was another day of unique tortures. Standing on the burning turf during the hottest part of the day, trying to beat Dan Heath in the gallon challenge, I often wished for spring training to be over. I looked forward to show days, not just for the thrill of actually competing, but because I knew we only rehearsed for three or four hours. I could live with that. It was only day one. I had to survive four more weeks of this.

Putting the music to drill was more difficult than I expected. I knew the music by heart, but I had to focus all my energy into hitting dots. It had been four hours since we learned those 19 sets. In my mind, the coordinates were now a mess of numbers, directions, and field markings. I relied on watching the form and moving to where I thought my path led. Music was an afterthought. Success would only come with repetition. Lots and lots of repetition. I noticed a trend in drum corps. Each block, we worked on something until we performed it correctly. After that, we did it until we couldn't get it wrong. I expected discipline for mistakes, but Ryan didn't believe in physical punishment – like running or pushups – so our success was dependent on each member's intrinsic desire to get better. I thought some punishment would fix the errors, but each time I ticked, I was glad Ryan felt the way he did.

We finally got through all the drill in brass block. It was physically exhausting. We'd been rehearsing for eight hours, and the sun was reaching that perfect spot in the sky just above the stands where it blinded us to Mark's hands, and the yard lines were invisible. Even so, we managed to do a complete performance of what we knew just before dinner. The meal gave us a chance to

recover before ensemble brought the guard and percussion with us to chunk through parts of the show, completing the creative package. I stacked my horn, hoping to avoid another scolding from Mike, and joined the line for food.

Ensemble was not much different than other rehearsals as far as protocol was concerned. The box gave instructions to Mark; Mark repeated the instructions to us; after the rep, we received comments from the box and from field techs and reset to do it better. The biggest differences were the battery providing a rhythmic intensity from within the drill, and we had to raise our awareness lest we be on the receiving end of a flagpole-to-face interaction. When present, Tom Aungst led these ensemble rehearsals. Our percussion caption head, Aungst was an educator in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, but most of us knew of him through his incredible success with The Cadets. It would have been impossible for him to hide his heavy, east coast accent, which we often imitated from the field, quoting an encounter from the summer before. *Hey, Layney – bump it up ten clicks, but aaahhhhh..... don't tell anybody.* In his absence, Ryan would take the lead.

I started getting extra doses of adrenaline as we rehearsed with the percussion. The battery energized the long tones of the low brass in the intro, and the front ensemble provided the color and character that brought it all together. The guard terrified me. It was only a matter of time before I got hit. I knew it. Still, it was exciting to see how Michael Shapiro had translated the audio of our show into beautiful and creative motions in the performers, creating another layer in the visual experience for the audience.

We didn't have much drill to begin with, but the sets we had learned that morning were pretty straightforward. There would be days where we would spend the majority of our visual time cleaning the complex sequences that Myron had written by hand. Today's simplicity allowed us to move quickly. Before I knew it, we were changing for our white shirt run-through.

This was it. The culmination of the previous blocks brought us to this – our first run through of the show, or at least the 14 sets we knew. Still, to be marching and playing my rookie show was a humbling thought.

"Set!" Marks hands went up. The Dr. Beat gave us our eight clicks. Backfield, the low brass introduced the theme of the opener. We played those white notes I hated in January, now my favorite music in the show. There wasn't much in the fingers to distract me, so I focused on my air as I embarked on a jazz run-a-thon into the first impact point of the show. I had six counts to catch my breath, turn front field, and angle up to the box before the next segment.

Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock. I loaded up on air and let them have it on the next downbeat. An open F on euphonium, I couldn't have asked for a better note to unload on the audience to show that the 2012 Blue Stars meant business. We were the first to perform at Akron, the season opener. This impact would be the first drum corps moment of tour, and we wanted to capitalize on that. I reached set 19 and halted. The rep was over.

"Check, Mark called from the podium. Moving only our eyes, we evaluated our work. "Adjust." We made the adjustments needed to be both on our dots and in the form, making note of these errors so that we could correct them next time. My

heart was pounding from the rep itself as well as the excitement of having just marched and played my first show segment with the full corps. I hardly had time to think about what had happened before Ryan sent us back to do it again. I was excited. This was fun.

“Reset.” I ran through the mess of crisscrossing pathways as everybody tried to get back to their starting location before anybody else. Just moments after arriving, the Dr. Beat began its clicks. We were off to the races once more. I was able to make corrections, hitting my dots better, and playing my music with more confidence. Coming into the halt, I found it much more difficult to fill up with air. At the end of the rep, my breathing was heavy and labored. I could feel the rhythm of my heart in my chest. I was glad we had so little drill. I wasn’t sure if I could march more.

“Reset.” I guess I would be marching more. I ran back to my dot, knowing that this next rep would be rough. My tone was nonexistent as I covered the field. There was sound coming out of my bell, but it could hardly be called music. The demands in my lower body were making success in my upper body impossible. Thanks, Myron. *Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.* Those six counts were the rest in the chunk. We had hardly gotten into our check and adjust when Ryan had us reset.

After three back-to-back runs of the same chunk with no break, I was over it. As we got our eight clicks, I had never hated the sound of a Dr. Beat more. I struggled to hit my dots. I had all but given up on playing well. I wasn’t even sure if I was playing. I was running and trying to breathe. *Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.* I barely got out a mezzo piano F. I could hardly use my air. The weight of the horn

was starting to get to me again. I tried to communicate telepathically with Mark at the end of the rep, willing him to give us the standby so I could lower my horn.

“Standby.” Oh, thank God.

“Reset.” Dammit. I started crying. This was all too much. Each rep was deteriorating, and I couldn’t stop it. I entered survival mode. The only thoughts running through my head were the generic commands my brain needed to get me through the exercise. *Backwards slide. Run. Run. Backwards running. Backwards sprinting. Run. Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock. Concert F. Guide. End rep.* I had all but given up trying, and wouldn’t you know it, we did the chunk again.

At the end of ensemble, after warm down, Russ introduced a new addition to the schedule, which he called “option block.” Each night, we had an additional hour of rehearsal after fourth meal. Staff could use this for anything they pleased. Most of the time, visual staff used this for dot tests, drill review, and video analysis. I wanted to get better, but I was exhausted. Just when I thought we were finished, we had more to do. I devoured the meal of Bosco Sticks before trekking back to the recital hall on campus to hear Ralph talk about an upcoming dot test.

This was spring training. Day after day, the monotony continued. Wake up. Breakfast. Visual. Lunch. Brass. Dinner. Ensemble. Snack. Option block. Sleep. Lather, rinse, repeat. I never knew what day it was. Michael Scott, a second year euphonium player warned me about this back in March.

“You’ll rehearse all week, then you’ll wake up on Saturday like, ‘Awesome! It’s the weekend,’ but it won’t matter, because this is drum corps and weekends mean nothing. You just stop keeping track. You’ll know it’s Wednesday when

everybody wears pink, and that's about it." I started distinguishing days by unique events.

One morning, Dan Heath arrived at the field, dressed in a blue shirt and the blue section shorts from 2010.

"Hey, Dan. Why so blue?"

"I guess it *is* a Blue World."

"Dan, what's your favorite color? Is it blue?"

"I hate all of you." He stormed off. I was terrified of Dan and never wanted to cross him, but I enjoyed the creativity of those who taunted him. Dan injured his back in Infantry school, and it had never healed properly. He was out of rehearsal for several days after treatment and adopted the nickname "Sideline Warrior."

There was also the day the weather decided to take a dump on us. It was cold and raining, but we rehearsed anyway. I could hardly focus. A rookie mistake, I had not packed a raincoat. The only outer layer of clothing I had was a Ball State hoodie that got drenched, soaking me in its heavy, cold embrace. I stood in the brass arc wondering how many extra calories I would burn that day shivering.

Mike scolded me on day two. Just before rehearsal, I stood, filling my water jug. Mike approached with that casual "I need to talk to you" look. It was just us.

"Hey, man. I want to talk to you about what you're putting online about the corps. You posted last night saying "The Blue Stars are back."" It was true. I had shared a photo of our opening impact with that caption. What we had done excited me, and I was ready to help make up for the 11th place finish the year before. "I just

don't feel like you have the right to say that, like – the Blue Stars are back? We never went anywhere. You didn't march that show, and your comment kind of sounds like what we did last year didn't matter because of how we finished, and that's not cool." I apologized. My rookie excitement was a little too abundant. I deleted the post that night and sent Mike a text to let him know and that I was still sorry. He didn't seem mad, but I respected him, and he was disappointed. That was worse.

My first year was filled with uncomfortable moments to learn from, like don't wait until bus signup day to pick your new seat partner. In March, Lizzie and I had started texting. I had asked some generic question on Facebook about being a student of Brian's, then played the "texting would be easier" card. It was Lizzie who brought up bus seats, asking if I had a partner yet. I did not, and we arranged to sit together. I had still never spoken to her in person, but I celebrated this small victory. Two weeks before spring training, she informed me that she was going to sit with Christina instead, stating that she would feel more comfortable with a girl. I couldn't blame her. The bus was our home. Spending that much time in close quarters with a stranger of the opposite sex was not the most casual way to get to know somebody. Still, I was heartbroken. I had also failed to find another person to sit with. Lucky for me, neither had Jack Huber. We paired up.

That night, the Tanner Lobby was packed with members. Each person got a point for the number of years marching, including the current season. Ageouts were awarded an extra point. As a rookie, I had one point. Jack had two. The points combined, and the signups went from highest to lowest, with each pair selecting the seat they wanted. Back of the bus sucks. The front of the bus was ideal. Those sitting

there would be the first off for laundry (which meant the first to finish laundry) and rest stops, and there would be less mess to fight through after shows when everybody was trying to get out of uniform. Somehow, Jack and I were able to get seats in the fourth row. I took the window seat. I couldn't use the aisle as legroom, but I would have the window to prop my pillow against. It was the lesser of two evils.

After eighteen days of waking up in Forest City, it was finally time to leave. We had a performance for the city that evening to showcase what we had done while we were there as well as let the citizens know what exactly we did all summer. By that time, we had a little more than half of the show on the field. For our performance that night, we would be ending with *Siren's Song*, the fifth of seven show segments. We had to go back to the dorms to pack and get ready for the show. Our first show, we were required to be performance ready – clean-shaven, show hair, and a fresh pair of white gloves.

Returning to the field, the bleachers were full. Community members had brought chairs and were setting them up in front of the stands. It seemed as though the entire city had come to see us perform. Each section gave a brief demonstration. The hornline played exercises from the horn manual as well as the Patterson chorale. As expected, the battery got the most applause for their show segment.

We set up for a full run. I was excited to perform. There were finally people around to cheer for us as we hit our big impacts, but instead of the roaring applause I expected, we were met with silence. The crowd didn't know how to respond. This was the first drum corps most of them had ever seen. They didn't know we fed off of

their energy. They followed concert etiquette and saved their applause for the end of the performance.

Siren's Song fell apart. The pit entered early, and the hornline recognized this. We each made the silent decision to wait to hear what others would do before coming in. We played nothing. There was a confused tension in the air. We knew we should have played, and the crowd seemed to have expected something. Tom got on the PA system.

"Well, that was interesting. How 'bout we do that again, yeah?" We ran back to redeem ourselves. The pit played correctly this time, and we were met with a roar of approval. Russ encouraged the audience to buy souvenirs and donate to our gas fund. The members dispersed to mingle with the crowd before we had to pack up and leave. Tomorrow morning, we would be waking up at the same time, returning to our normal schedule, but we would be in Sparta, Wisconsin, just outside of La Crosse. We had to hit the road.

The bus was not as crowded as the single charter to Iowa, but I was starting to get a sense of how little space I would get this summer. The seats were personal puzzles. I figured out the perfect combination of boxes to fit everything under my seat, my water jug going on the floor in front of my feet, and my backpack getting shoved into any last bit of free space available in the overhead. This was home.

I'm proud to state that the Blue Stars Brass Bus is a hazing free environment, but bus time is sacred. What happens on the bus stays on the bus. We watched movies and slept in uncomfortable positions, and that's all that ever happened on the bus. Mostly the second.

It was a three-hour drive to Sparta. Along the way, we had our first Wal-Mart run. I entered the big box store with a new appreciation for the infinite amount of junk I could buy. I wanted it all. I settled for a Coke. It had been weeks since I had ingested caffeine. It's the little things.

I was glad when we got to the high school. My legs were cramped, and my neck hurt. The window wasn't helping. My first time rolling into a new housing site, I searched for my suitcase in the pile of luggage the battery had pulled from under the bus. Pillow and sleeping bag in hand, I rolled my suitcase through the main doors and into the gym we were sleeping in. Gone were the days of dorms and beds. This was real drum corps. I set up shop on the men's half of the gym and settled, the constant presence of the Spartan statue watching me as I slept.

Grass is evil. After two weeks of learning a show on turf, my legs were on fire as I pushed my feet through the friction of tall grass. The rehearsal field at Sparta was a three-minute walk from the school. Perched atop a plateau, the view was stunning. I could see farms, collections of trees, and the rolling landscape of Wisconsin. That was not enough to make up for stress my lower body was enduring. Our normal basics exercises were harder with the added resistance. The staff encouraged us to think of it as over-training.

"If you can fight through this with our technique, just think of how great you'll look on Finals night on that beautiful Lucas Oil turf." Chris instructed us to grab a handful of grass, rip it up, insult it, and throw it to the ground. "There. Now no more excuses or complaining." We continued to break down our technique to

become increasingly detailed. We paired up and took turns performing the stationary exercises while our partner observed and made comments. I paired with David Roes, a rookout from the Netherlands. I waited for him to repeat what the other staff members had always told me. He said nothing. I wasn't sure if I had begun to master the exercises or if he was being easy on me. I assumed the latter.

We continued to set drill, each set bringing us one dot closer to the end of the show. *Part 5* was tricky. Everything moved in counts of six or twelve, with a tempo bump every twenty-four counts, reaching 212 beats per minute. It was a frantic and taxing experience. An ornate and challenging follow-the-leader sequence we would later call *The Trail of Tears* would result in my first full-speed collision as I marched backwards into Alan, kept from his dot by a member who had forgotten where to go. His horn slammed into the back of my head, forcing my face into my mouthpiece. Over half the season's falls and collisions would occur in this sequence, and it would propel me full speed into a transition that barely possible, as Zach Dangel, Nate Morabito, and I attempted to swing around the end of a form, switch our order, and end up twenty steps away in just twelve counts. Each rep, the three of us crashed into one another, maneuvered our horns to avoid loud clanking, and ended *Part 5* breathless and annoyed. Only one movement to go.

Musically, the closer was a combination of the two main Dvorak themes from the show in half time with augmented rhythms. The drill mimicked that power. Myron had written us into a large block that morphed into a triangle over the course of the augmented statement. It was an opportunity to showcase our straight leg technique with screaming high toes before our dash to the finish.

“Justin baritone.” I raised my hand high into the air to show the box I was listening as Ralph addressed me. “On that last transition, the 22-count push across the field, you’re popping out of your rank by about two steps near the end.” It was a deceptively difficult transition. I traveled twenty yards away from the 50, but moved forward only half a step. At the slide, the natural rotation of my hips and shoulders brought me forward on the field. Though I was in my cover, I was out of at least three other dress points. We reset, and I focused on the technique of my slide. I twisted as much as I could from my hips, striving for an impossible flat front, then rotated my torso the rest of the way, leaving my feet free to travel to the dot. I felt like I was actually travelling backwards with my hips and shoulders squared to the sideline. I made the correction on the first try.

“Staff, can we get somebody with Justin on this next rep?” Just kidding. On the plus side, our first ending positioned me in front of where my parents had tickets for Finals night. I fantasized about coming into the halt, belting out the last chord of the show, and ripping my horn down as my mom and dad watched on.

Ryan began overtraining us in brass. We ran laps before repping segments to simulate show fatigue. I could play the music well enough standing or in short chunks, but with an elevated heart rate and heavy breathing, it was a crapshoot trying to hit pitches. My range during longer reps diminished to the D above the staff. I ended up cut from anything higher than that. Rehearsing *Part 4* in the overgrown football stadium at the high school, Ryan worked the tempo beyond Frank’s written metronome marking of 200 so that we wouldn’t feel like that was a struggle. Rep after rep, the met got faster. Rep after rep, individuals dropped out of

the sextuplet triple tounging. My legs were on fire. The grass felt like a jungle. It must have been over a month since it had gotten mowed. I wasn't even achieving the technique or the music anymore. The met couldn't go any further, could it?

It couldn't.

"Guys, guess what?" Ryan was grinning ear to ear. "That was 250 beats per minute. The Dr. Beat doesn't go any further. Let's go back to 200." *Beep..... beep.....beep.....beep.....* Good God, 200 was slow. Mission accomplished.

Before leaving Sparta, I found myself on Veterans Memorial Field at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse. There were only a few days until our competitive tour began, and the corps had a few rehearsals at the college stadium to get a final read on the production from a better venue before we unveiled it to the public. The turf was slick and flat – a much-needed break from the knotted grass at the high school. For PT, Chris took us on what the vets referred to as the "nature run." We left the stadium and began a run that took us through a park next to a cemetery. I wondered which side of the trail best reflected the experience we were about to have. The route narrowed, merging into a long, gravel trail. As we continued down the path, I noticed I was surrounded by wetlands. The musty smell of stagnant water filled my nostrils. The bluffs towered over us from a distance. Atop Granddad Bluff, a flag waved in the breeze. It was a beautiful day for drum corps.

The days at the stadium were detail oriented. With a high press box, the staff had a perfect vantage point for large-scale experimentation. It was a lot of trying new things and playing loud. Frank was visiting for a few days to finalize the music,

and he was determined to get our impacts up to the box. Ralph and the visual team used the height to get pickier with the drill. They could now see the forms with greater clarity – or rather they could now see the extent to which our forms lacked clarity.

At the end of our last day in the stadium, we set up for a full run, only to be stopped as we began *Part 6*. Rehearsal was over. It was time for food. I was actually upset that we stopped. We were just one movement away from completing our first full performance run. *Just let us do it*. They would let us the next day in Sparta. On grass. It was a twelve-minute battle, but I came out victorious. I was physically and mentally fatigued, but I was alive, and I realized that there was nothing more to add. That was the show. The worst was over. Surviving the first run meant that I could survive any run. As Russ briefed us at the end of rehearsal, Dan Smith raised his hand to speak.

“Rookies, we just completed our first drum corps show. I think that’s pretty awesome.” He was right. That was one of a countless number of times we would repeat those exact motions over the course of the summer. Brad Furlano stepped forward to address the corps. He was quiet and isolated. I had rarely heard anything from him, but I knew his importance as the executive director of the corps. He stood in front of us, preparing his words. A spark lit in his eyes. He looked up.

“So, I saw a lot of people out there working hard. I also saw a lot of people giving up. It sounded like some people weren’t playing – I *saw* some people not playing.” His voice filled with a hot energy, fueled by anger. “You get out there and you play every note. You don’t get to pick and choose. You don’t get to take breaks.

You play that entire show.” I was now terrified of Brad Furlano. “There are two types of thinking. You either do it so you do it right, or you do so you stone-cold can’t get it wrong. You must be the latter.” He drilled a hole straight through me as he eyed every member of the hornline.

Show number two came in Onalaska, Wisconsin, a field I learned to hate. The Onalaska preview show was our first public performance of the full show. Members of the community came out to see what we were up to for this summer and to show their support through physical presence and monetary contributions. It was our grand farewell to the La Crosse community before we shipped out for competitions all over the country.

Still struggling to get through the whole show, the program itinerary was grueling. I watched the clouds roll in as Russ addressed the community and introduced the corps, much like he did in Forest City. He provided a brief explanation of the show before introducing *Part 1*, which we performed. At the end of the movement, we caught our breath while he introduced *Part 2*. We performed that, and the process continued. After we finished our full chunk-through run-through, we reset for a full production run. At no point in this process were we given time to rehydrate. On the field, the atmosphere soured. Frustrated, dehydrated, and fatigued, we stood, waiting for the start of the full run. I surveyed the field. I couldn’t see any member’s ankles. The grass was eating us alive. I stood in my opening set, mindlessly staring backfield, praying that I would make it through this performance.

My body gave up on technique by the end of the opener. Mentally, I still fought for screaming high toes and straight legs, but I had reached muscle failure. I

wasn't getting to my dots with our technique. Grass was tough. Abandon the approach. My mind was racing with thoughts, few of them relating to drill or music. *I'm going to die. This is only Part 2. I can't breathe. Please, make it stop.* Each movement was a checkpoint, a chance to reflect on all that I loved in life. I vowed to never again take breathing for granted. This was our first performance in uniform. That same snug tailoring that makes corps uniforms so sexy also makes breathing impossible, limiting the room your body had to expand and take in air to almost nothing. I felt bad for the part of history where women were expected to wear corsets. I was exercising in one now. I found myself trying to make it through the Trail of Tears with no idea of how I had gotten there. A brief collision with Dangel and Morabito ended *Part 5*. Just one more to go. As the hornline turned front field for our big impact in the closer, I heard Foth scream from within the form.

"Let's go!" I gave everything I had for those last thirty seconds. I ripped my horn down at the end of the show, almost dropping it. My arms were gone. I wasn't sure what contorted posture I had been using, but my bell had been below parallel for much of the closer. I stood, accepting the applause, tears streaming down my face. I wish I could say they were tears of joy. They were not. I was in pain. I struggled to breath in the tight uniform. My ability to hold the horn had long since left my body. We left the field and set up in twos. The last part of the schedule had us returning to give a standstill performance of the show. If some lunatic showed up and started taking hostages at a band show, I wanted to be first. I couldn't do the show again. I needed to be saved.

A streak of lightning tore through the sky. The immediacy of the thunder declared that this particular storm was ready to unload its power. The standstill was called off. We were all thinking the same thing – we were saved. It was now a race against the skies to get everything loaded before the storm dumped on us. Nobody was in need of assistance more than the front ensemble. Wooden bars and electronics don't mix well with heavy storms. We did our best to help get equipment to the trailer, and they took it from there. I stacked my horn outside the bus and quickly changed out of uniform, hoping to get everything on the truck before it rained. The equipment trailer was a dark and busy place. A stairway led up the back to the storage space for uniforms and instruments. The pit hurriedly loaded the bottom of the truck via doors on the side. I followed the line up the stairs. We were slowed at the top by battery members securing their gear on shelves. Congestion like this was normal. It was part of the experience, but as rain started to fall, it was far from welcome. I squeezed past and secured my case in the euphonium storage area, a designated space along the side of the trailer. The generator was off. The trailer was dark. After a brief search, my uniform was hung in its assigned spot, and I exited via a steep ladder at the front of the trailer where truck loading crew was loading tubas. With large, twenty-plus pound instruments being swiftly moved, I stayed out of their way.

The rain came down, a refreshingly cool break from the heat that had plagued the La Crosse portion of spring training. Several members left the school in search of a nearby Dairy Queen. Afraid of being late, I stayed on the bus, complaining about the lack of milk I had, keeping me from the Oreos my mom had sent me in a

care package. You can't have Oreos without milk. It's just not right. Time stretched on and the rain continued to fall. I regretted not going to DQ. I could have had a refreshingly cold Oreo Blizzard. As it drew closer to our departure, flocks of members returned. They had bags of food that smelled better than anything I remembered. It had been weeks since I had tasted fast food, and I wanted it. Dan Smith shuffled through the aisle, stopping at my seat. He reached into a bag and pulled out a bottle of milk.

"We found a gas station. Stop your bitching." He continued back toward his seat.

"You're my favorite person ever," I shouted back at him.

"Love youuuuuuuuu." He made a heart with his hands. I'm glad I ended up next to him in November. The bus lurched forward, the journey to competitive tour beginning. We had one more stop before Akron. Our next day would be spent at Penn High School in Mishawaka, Indiana. Still far from home, I was glad to be returning to my state. There was something comforting about the arbitrary line that defined the title of where we were. It was another long drive – a chance to bond on the bus. We rolled down the interstate, the hardest part of the season behind us. I had somehow survived my first spring training. For four weeks, I was broken down, pushed to my limits, taxed and tested for over twelve hours per day. I came out on top of the odds. I thought back to just before we took the field in Onalaska. We circled up and sang the corps song – the pre-show ritual. There was silence before Luke Sesker, our center snare, added the last, most important part of the tradition.

"3...2...1...."

"F...C...Ooooooooo!" I replayed that moment over in my mind. Over the last four weeks, I was living what the corps motto meant. We drove into the dark unknown ahead. I was beginning to understand.

Chapter 5: Tour

I stepped off the bus outside InfoCision Stadium in Akron, Ohio. In a few hours, The Blue Stars would be the first sights and sounds of drum corps since The Cadets had their victory run in August. The lot was empty when we arrived. It was oddly calm. When I had watched lots, I marveled at the chaos of so many groups preparing themselves in such a small space. It was a giant game of Tetris with busses and trucks. Today, we were the first blocks to land.

I stood in twos outside the bus, staring into the back of the head in front of me. We were dressed in halves, our jackets folded neatly and tightly tucked into our shakos. I held my shako flat against my left arm, my water jug clenched in my hand. I had filled it to the top. I wasn't going to get dehydrated on the day of my first competition. My horn rested along my right side. I waited, unmoving, a product of the discipline of four weeks of meticulous training. Dan Heath came down the line, inspecting the face of each bari/euph. He personally enforced the clean-shaven rule. Individuals who either ignored the rule or missed noticeable portions of their face were given a disposable razor and instructed to dry shave on the bus. Reaching me, he leaned in for a closer inspection, lifting my chin and turning my head to view the other side. He moved on, saying nothing.

In high school, competitions warmups were closely monitored. Drum corps was a free for all. There was no set location. We had to make sure we made our gate time, but everything before that was up to the corps. Ralph led us on a search for a spot to warm up near the stadium. I immediately regretted filling my jug. Already weak from our rehearsal that afternoon, I was now supporting an extra eight

pounds with the arm that had to hold up eight pounds of metal for a 12-minute production. I feared that each minute we walked was a minute I wouldn't be able to hold the horn in the show. We needed to pick a spot soon. After nearly ten minutes of searching, we commandeered a small, abandoned parking lot covered in gravel dust. As Jack monitored, I stacked my horn and joined the others for stretch.

I loved being in uniform. There was a power and presence to the clean line of fabric that followed the slight contour of my body. As we marched across the parking lot, I felt unstoppable. I wanted to show off, but we were alone. Lots were usually. We had no spectators. We prepared in isolation, tucked away in our quiet parking lot.

Ryan came to get us for brass. He and the staff had scouted out a new location with more space. We gathered our things, reformed our twos, and transitioned to the new site, weaving between apartment buildings. We reached an open lot across from the apartments we just cut through and created an arc facing the building. As we warmed up on our own, we got our first spectators. Tenants across the street appeared on their balconies. Not seeming to mind the noise we were hurling toward their homes, they looked intrigued, leaning casually against their railings, drinks in hand. Others joined us on foot. As more people arrived for the show, the quest to find corps warming up had begun. At this point, we were the only corps playing. Naturally, we got the most attention.

I saw the flash of a familiar face. Doing a double take, I noticed a young lady making direct eye contact with me. It was Emily Schoff, a girl I had met online after connecting through DCI's Ambassador program. Her father had been a Bluecoat, and

she was determined to do the same. She was several years younger than me and was spending one last season as a fan before chasing her own drum corps dreams. I knew she would be at the show, but I never expected her to appear in the lot. I suddenly had a specific audience to perform for. I gave a slight nod of recognition and returned to my warmup. I had a show to prepare for.

The corps circled up outside the tunnel. I was minutes away from my first show as a member of a World Class drum corps. I thought of my family and the people who helped me get to this point. Other than Emily, whom I had never spoken to in person, I didn't know anybody in the crowd. I was living my dream, but nobody was around to see it. I closed my eyes, imagining a small section of fans just for me. I could see my mom, dad, and sister. Behind them were Mr. Earnest and Mr. Stowers. A small group from Ball State was there too. I noticed people from high school, glad that they could see me do the thing I had talked about so much while we were classmates.

"The last four weeks have prepared you for this." Russ' voice brought me back to reality. My heart beat faster. Russ continued to hype us up, preparing our minds for the performance ahead. Like golf, we couldn't affect our opponent's performance, but it was still a battle. For twelve minutes, we had to fight against our own bodies, defying our brains, which asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"3...2...1...."

"*F...C...Ooooooooo!*" I pulled my shako over my eyes and stepped onto the turf.

"Please welcome to the field from La Crosse, Wisconsin – The Blue Stars!"

Dan Potter's voice boomed through the stadium. The energy from the crowd flooded the stadium, surrounding me. I soaked it up.

"Have a great show, Blue Stars." Mark Donahue wished us well as we took our opening sets and he made his way to the podium.

The seconds stretched on into infinity. I watched the guard finish setting their equipment, each moment bringing us closer to the show. We stood in silence, waiting. I tried to remember how to breathe.

"Performing their 2012 program *Blue World*, Drum Corps International is proud to present... The Blue Stars!" The crowd released a roar of approval. I swallowed, suppressing vomit. I thought of the lap bar on a roller coaster, each click tightening the hold. Once you secure yourself, there's no turning back. All you can do is hang on tight and scream through the ride. Standing on the field, I was locked in and ready to go. I watched Zack's hands as they gave the prep. The pit began to play, pulling the corps up the chain lift. I brought my horn up and took a deep breath as we crept over the hill and down the track. *Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock*. The impact was everything I thought it would be. My dream was alive.

The show was a struggle. I felt the pressure of thousands of eyes on me at all times. At any given moment, somebody was watching me specifically. I didn't want to give them anything bad to say. It was a rough ride, struggling against the weight of the horn and the demand of the drill. The performance was broadcast live in theaters all over the country. I could not let up. Finishing *Part 5*, Dangel, Nate, and I crashed into one another. It didn't matter. I kept pushing.

My first drum corps show ended. I struggled to look strong despite the weakness I felt. I kept a stern gaze as we exited, Phantom Regiment already taking the field. I marched through the corps I had spent eight years hoping to join, hating the enthusiastic cheers the crowd offered for their arrival. This was not the Phantom Regiment I had idolized for so long. It was a group of kids wearing a different uniform than I was. I was a Blue Star. My heart was home. They meant nothing.

Female Orgasm was scheduled for February 6. My eyes shot back to the IMPACT event billboard outside the porta potty Dan was using. Surely I read that wrong. I moved closer to the sign. In the center of the parking lot at Minnesota State University in Mankato was an advertisement for *Female Orgasm*. Neat. The restroom door swung open, and Dan appeared. I grabbed my bag of Oreos and milk I had purchased at the gas station across the street, and we returned to the busses.

Mankato had been an interesting experience. At yesterday's rehearsal day, we woke to an incorrectly lined field. Realizing their mistake, field lining attempted to correct the error with red paint. The result was 100 yards of white and red tick marks that cluttered my field of vision. It was nearly impossible to determine which marks we were supposed to be following, and the staff gave conflicting answers. What they were able to agree on was that today was a great day to train us to be Kenyan athletes.

The beatings began in visual. After each rep, good or bad (they were mostly bad), we set our horns down and sprinted to a fence outside the rehearsal field. With our newfound fatigue, we repeated the exercise. We ran. We marched. We ran.

We marched. The goal was overtraining to simulate a more realistic cardiovascular demand. After the first thirty seconds of the show, we no longer had the luxury of marching with fresh legs and a resting heart rate. Why, then, did we practice our basics that way? That was the question the staff was hoping to answer.

After lunch, we had one final block before an evening of laundry that was desperately needed. I had been wearing the same shorts on repeat since the last time we did laundry over two weeks ago. I wasn't wearing shirts as often, but each had the same greasy feel, soaked with sunscreen, perpetually dank. I loved laundry day rehearsals. With the shortened time and no show later that night, I could give it my all, wearing myself out rep after rep, knowing that an evening of fun would help me recover. The challenge was keeping your mind from the freedom until your body left the field.

The staff packed onto the scaffolding as we set up to run the show. The sun was giving off the warm, orange hue that signaled its descent toward the horizon. I bathed in the light, watching Zack for his cue. His face was scrunched, the wrinkles around his eyes tanned from staring into the sun. He stood statuesque, unmoving. I imagined him as Howard Roark, the dominant figure in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. I wanted to be like him.

As the show started, I saw Sam Rusch, a snare, pacing on the back sideline. Normally outgoing and energetic, he looked distressed. The battery watched him, laughing. He sprinted toward a bush and began puking. I watched this while counting, waiting for my entrance. The show had begun. Sam finished spitting vomit from his mouth, grabbed his snare, and got back into the drill just as the low brass

and battery stepped off. As we arrived at the opening impact, Erik Burch's voice came over the speaker.

"Drum Corps International is proud to present... The Blue Stars!" *Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.* The fake announcement got a real response. The impact's energy was like nothing I had experienced yet that summer. The air was electric. For the next ten minutes, I had the best show of the season. It didn't matter that this wasn't a competition. Every performance mattered. If education is about the process over the product, then this run was just as important as our Finals performance – it was just a month's worth of rehearsal dirtier. The show flew by. I snapped my horn down with any remaining energy, now completely spent. The rush of endorphins flooded my system. I waited for the staff to praise our energy.

There was silence from the scaffolding. We looked around. Ryan grabbed the mic.

"Guys, I don't know what's going on – if you're already doing laundry, but that was unacceptable. There was no energy out there at all. It's like you weren't even trying. I feel as though we just wasted an entire rehearsal day because nothing that we worked on showed up. There were missed releases, bad attacks, I can't find the timing in your feet, it just..." His voice trailed off. More silence. "We're on a tight schedule, so we don't have time to do that again, but know that that was not okay." It's always comforting to know that your best run was complete garbage.

"Hey, listen up!" I had never heard Sam address the corps. "For all you guys sitting on the sideline complaining about not feeling well or your foot hurts or whatever, I just puked my guts out and marched the show. Man up." In an activity

that causes this much stress, sometimes the only thing you can do is get away from it for a while. I boarded the bus with my bag of laundry and let my mind return to the real world.

The grass at Blakeslee Stadium felt like turf. It was better than half the fairways I had ever walked on. The rehearsal that morning had gone much better. Refreshed and smelling a tad less repulsive, the laundry block had paid off. We were ready for a great show. The small stands were packed with fans end to end. The bleachers began just steps off the front sideline. The pit could barely fit into the remaining space, leaving no room for the podium. As a result, Mark and Zack would conduct from within the audience. I watched Mark make his journey to the center section, climb several rows, and claim his real estate. The white of his uniform was just enough of a contrast to stick out amidst the sea of colors and patterns. I stared at him, memorizing his location, then turned backfield for the start of the show.

We performed for 700 seconds, and I felt every one of them. I couldn't seem to do anything right, missing notes and making mental mistakes. I felt like I was always on defense, doing damage control instead of anticipating the next move. Performing wasn't fun anymore. I finished the show silent with frustration. The hornline got reamed the day before for the best performance many of us had given. After the mess I had just created, I could only imagine what the staff would say.

The staff joined us. Ryan drew us in, smiling.

"How many of you had your best show out there?" Almost everybody's hands shot into the air. I found myself in an uncomfortable minority. "Yeah, I could tell.

That was a completely different hornline than yesterday. If you can keep doing what you just did, we're going to be in good shape." I was struck by the irony. When I gave it my all and succeeded, we performed poorly as a group. When I struggled and performed poorly, we were praised for our achievements. I was always on the losing side.

I sat in Noodles and Company, waiting for the scores with a bowl of Penne Rosa. A group of members came knocking on the window from outside, signaling that scores were being announced across the street. I stepped out in time to hear the results. 68.7, slotted well above Troopers and just over a point behind Spirit. We were making slow progress, but there had been no significant jumps in our score. I wanted something more, and with my home show just days away, there was no better time to do it.

"Alright, Blue Stars, listen up." The harsh lights of the bus shocked my senses. We had just pulled into our Merrillville housing site, and Mark was explaining how to find the sleeping area. I look around, not fully awake, but my body knew what to do. I coasted on autopilot, grabbing my things, finding my luggage outside the bus, and securing floor space to inflate my mattress. We slept in a cafeteria, and the walls were lined with outlets. It was a beautiful sight. I secured one for my phone before changing for bed.

The room was hot. Indiana was in the middle of an exceptionally warm summer, and much of that heat remained, clinging to the night air that found its way into the building. I removed my shirt, throwing it in my spread pile before heading

to the restroom. There were mirrors just inside the entrance. I stared, processing the reflection staring back at me. For the last six weeks, and I had spent little time analyzing my physique. I knew I was fat. My skin never seemed to get any darker – there was a vague difference at my hips between exposed and covered skin, but I had remained painfully pale. That was the image in my mind, but not the image staring back at me.

I could see my ribs. A clean line ran down the center of my stomach where abs would continue to fill in. There were muscles in my arms I had never seen before. While not a tan, my skin gave off a warm glow. A lot about my body had changed in the last six weeks, and we had six more to go. I finished getting ready, smiling. For the first time that I could clearly remember, I was happy with my body.

The next morning, many members were eating breakfast indoors. I walked through the halls on my way to the food truck, passing dozens of members who lined the walls just inside the entrance. I found it odd. We weren't usually supposed to eat inside. I opened the doors and was hit by a solid wall of heat and humidity. Stepping into the sun, sweat immediately began to race down my neck. Every breath was like being underwater, moisture saturating the air. I knew why everybody was inside. Though against the rules, the risk of getting in trouble made for a great alternative to the hell I was now walking through. I joined them.

Frank drilled us on tempo. On tour for a couple days, he was leading our rehearsals with the old-school intensity he knew from his years with Star of Indiana. Our sense of pulse was all over the place. There were eighty members on the field with eighty different tempos. He had us perform marching basics while counting,

cutting the met mid rep to see how long we would stay together. It was never long. Our only source of time was Mark, and he was producing a clear pattern, but the results on the field were mixed.

“Guys,” Frank was irritated. “If we can’t stay together doing this, there’s no way the show is going to achieve clarity – not while there are this many interpretations of pulse. Get your eyes on Mark. Put your feet on his hands and play to your feet. Reset.” Frank continued to stress pulse, beating the concept into us again and again throughout the block.

It was a show day. Just an hour from where I grew up, this was my “home show” so to speak. I was expecting my parents, my aunt Marilyn (who supplied me with the DCI DVDs each Christmas), my best friend, youth leader, and Mr. Earnest. The one thing they had in common is that none of them had seen me march drum corps. They had seen videos and heard stories about *such and such* corps performing *this show* or *that*. I was now the story. I rehearsed as if they were there to watch me.

Even with this motivation, the heat continued to wear me down. It was the hottest it had been all season, and the addition stress was testing my emotional stamina. I hoped for breaks that never came. Instead, the staff pushed harder, demanding levels of perfection I was not yet capable of achieving. On water breaks, we paired up, ensuring that our partners drank for at least ten seconds. I needed no monitoring, willingly downing as much water as I could without throwing up. I finished my jug early into the block. I had been holding the urge to pee for several water breaks, afraid to leave rehearsal. When my jug was dry, I couldn’t take it any more, sprinting off the field to the restrooms outside the stadium. I had never been

happier to stay hydrated nor more afraid to use the restroom. Drum corps is weird like that.

Tom Aungst never did full runs on show days. He thought it caused unnecessary fatigue, robbing our bodies of energy we would need for the performance. I loved him for that, especially today. My body was struggling to survive the reps in ensemble. Performing the show before leaving to perform the show again might have killed me. Dying in Onalaska had sounded wonderful, but I had friends and family to perform for. I needed to be fresh.

Clouds were rolling in on the horizon, but the sun continued to beat down on my skin. The warm glow I had noticed that morning had since become a burn, the sweat from my face stinging the cracked skin of my cheeks. The water in the showers felt like thousands of tiny needles piercing my face. I rushed through the shower process, lathering and rinsing quickly, pulling the blades of my razor against the tender redness of my face. I was out just in time. The showers were flooding, and as I crossed the threshold, another member stood, peeing into the rising water.

The clouds had since taken over the sky. The trees swayed with a steady rhythm as wind blew debris around outside the entrance to the school. I sat in the cold AC of the bus as we waited for kitchen crew to finish packing up the food truck. With each moment, the sky darkened. The wind blew stronger. Members checked the weather on their phones, indicating that a storm was on its way. I hoped it would hold long enough for me to perform for my family. I wanted them to see what I had accomplished in the six weeks since I had seen them.

The bus pulled into the lot at Merrillville High School, the first recognizable landmark I had seen all summer. This was the home show for three other members of my section as well, Dan Heath, Matt Schneider, and Robert Fitzsimmons. We watched the skies anxiously, hoping for no interruptions. I screamed out the bus hype with a new energy. This performance was personal.

We stood in twos outside the bus. I had to pee. I had gone before leaving the school, but I had been doing lots of hydrating. I was going to need a bathroom during warmup. There was no way I'd get through the show in my current state. Dan came down the line for inspections. I turned, showing both sides of my face before he lifted my chin, touching just below my Adam's apple.

"Shave your chest. You have hair coming out the top of your compression gear." I nodded, acknowledging his command. He still terrified me. Christina arrived, distributing our limp, cream-colored rain plumes. No sooner had I secured mine onto my shako that we were ordered back onto the bus. The wind was gusting violently, pushing the swirling charcoal-colored accumulations in the sky ever closer. Minutes later, a mix of rain and hail came beating down, obscuring the view just beyond the window. The Glassmen's contras were stacked outside their buses, getting pelted by the hail. In the distance, just visible across the lot, the Pioneer flag waved proudly in the wind.

We waited. The storm would soon pass, and we would perform with a delay. I worried about direction changes on the slippery turf, especially *The Trail of Tears*. A strong pang of discomfort in my lower abdomen reminded me that I still needed to pee. I had heard stories of members filling empty Gatorade bottles, but there was no

way I could fit this in just one bottle, and once you start, you can't just stop the flow. I opted to hold on for dear life, wait out the storm, and go as soon as we left the bus.

The waiting never ended. An hour went by, but the rain continued to fall. The official call to cancel the show had not been made, so we remained on the buses in uniform, ready at a moment's notice. Glancing out the window, it was painfully obvious that we weren't going anywhere any time soon. Obvious due to rain that fell, painful due to the intense need to empty my bladder. I sat, hoping to avoid an embarrassing and messy situation that might ruin my uniform and my bus seat simultaneously.

One hour approached two. The rain had stopped, but regular bursts of lightning kept us from safely resuming our show routine. I wondered what I had done to deserve this punishment. I was already upset that my home show was getting rained out, but the not being able to pee part made me hate my life.

"The show's been called. Get out of your uniforms." The words coming out of Mark's mouth had never sounded so perfect. I changed faster than I ever had, throwing my uniform on the hanger. I quickly put on shorts, running to the front of the bus so I could rid my body of its liquid burden. As I stepped off, I was face to face with everyone who had come to watch me perform. Their faces lit up, excited to finally see me in person. I looked at them painfully. It had been six weeks since I had seen my family, but I didn't care. I sprinted into the school.

Returning, I embraced each in a strong hug. Many of them commented on the physical changes I had noticed earlier that morning. I beamed when I saw Mr.

Earnest with his gears around his neck, but wearing a Blue Stars shirt. I commented on the contradiction.

“Nobody that was involved with the corps when I marched is there anymore. I have no connections to The Cavaliers. It was just the corps I marched. I’m a Blue Star now!” I apologized for the cancellation. Neither Colin nor Tim had seen a live drum corps show. This was their first exposure, and they had only been able to see the Racine Scouts before the storm washed away my chance to perform for them.

We left Merrillville on I-65, heading south for Muncie. “Home show” number two was tomorrow. I’d perform for my Ball State colleagues. My parents were driving down with my grandparents to watch as well. Hopefully this time they’d have something to see. The rain continued off and on for first part of our trip. I spotted a mass of red dots littering the horizon, blinking together. Windmills. I lived just twenty minutes from where we now drove. A pang of homesickness crept into my heart as mile after mile of familiar landscapes came into view then passed into the darkness behind us.

“Everybody, grab your stuff and get inside. Help the pit on your way. Move fast. Go!” Frank addressed us from the press box at Muncie Southside High School. It had been another miserably hot day, and for the last fifteen minutes, those of us on the field had watched as a dense mass of storm clouds crept into view behind the staff. There was a fire in Frank’s eyes as he led our rehearsal. Nobody wanted to be the one to interrupt his energy and point out the impending danger. A gust of wind caught his attention and, noticing the approaching storm, prompted our dismissal.

Muncie was going to get rained out. Currently, my family was somewhere in their three-hour drive to Ball State for nothing. The weather refused to cooperate. I just wanted one show where those I cared about could see me live my dream. Our rehearsal moved to the gym, and Frank fired up once more. It was obvious he was passionate about this activity. When he spoke to the hornline, it was as though his very existence depended on his ability as an educator to help us grow. Frank discussed concepts I had never focused on – free buzzing, how to release notes with a breath, and how to blend as a section. With him in front, I felt like we were in good hands.

The rain stopped, and the show was only delayed by an hour. Wheeling my luggage to the bus, I stepped outside into the storm's aftermath. To the east, the dark wall of clouds pressed on. Above me was a clear blue sky, just starting to turn colors as the sun neared its setting stage. The air was almost chilly. I imagined how comfortable I would be in the full uniform in a few hours as the sun and temperature both continued to drop.

Staring out the window of the bus, Scheumann Stadium came into view. I felt a bizarre sense of misplacement. I was back at Ball State, my school, but I was arriving on a charter bus. My saxophone was nowhere to be found, the star on my chest much different than the heavy wool uniform I wore for football games. Groups of spectators watched our bus as it turned into the lot. I stared at them. One year ago, that was me.

"Stop looking at my bus!" Nacho was now leaning into my seat, shouting at the oblivious bystanders. *"Don't look at my... you can look at my bus!"*

We walked in twos to our warmup, each step bringing me closer to my family in the stands. Before I knew it, I was staring at the home stands from behind the Side 1 end zone. Russ hyped us for the show. I pulled my shako over my eyes and stepped onto my home field.

“...The Blue Stars!” Scheumann Stadium exploded with noise. Home to the Music For All Summer Symposium, the stands were packed with hundreds of energetic high school students who loved music, and they loved us. We had performed so many smaller venues, I had forgotten what a crowd response felt like. The air was electric as we took the field. I knew this stadium well from my Saturdays with the Pride of Mid-America. The turf felt natural under my feet.

“Have a great show, Blue Stars.” Mark took the podium. I stepped off my dot, scanning the audience before turning to watch Zack on the back sideline for the start of the show. Somewhere in the sea of faces were my parents, grandparents, and classmates. This performance was for them.

The Summer Symposium kids gave it up for every impact. Each hit boosted my adrenaline. I thought of my family in the stands. As they watched me sprint around the field playing Dvorak, I hoped they finally understood why I refused to take no for an answer when I first wanted to audition. I couldn’t be happier. I moved through the show, fueled by the crowd response and the love of performing.

“...from La Crosse, Wisconsin, The Blue Stars!” I had no idea how the show ended. Leaving the field, I was searching my mind for memories of the show.

Weren’t we just finishing Part 1? I remember the transition into Part 2, but then.... Did we play the ballad? We must have, or I couldn’t have ended up here. I had experienced

my first autopilot show. My brain and body were working together in perfect unison. My thoughts each second related to musical and visual demands I needed to execute. Once that task was accomplished, the commands disappeared from my memory to make room for the information needed to get to the next set while playing the right music. The end result is like waking up from a dream. You feel the experience and its effects, but you have no idea what actually happened. The only things that stick out are mistakes. I left the field for the first time with a show I couldn't remember. It was a great day to do it.

I returned to the stadium in sandals, swim trunks, and a t-shirt. With age, my grandparents had lost the ability to walk distances, so I came to them. I spotted my grandfather. A tall man, he was stooped with age, but moved in short, quick steps towards me. Always working outside, his skin had been tanned to a dark mahogany, a sharp contrast to the wide, white grin that he now wore.

"Well, there," he chuckled. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen him so lively. He wrapped me in a tight embrace, patting me firmly on the back. Trapped in his loving hold, I saw my grandma as she wheeled herself closer. I knelt to hug her, receiving a kiss as well. She, too, wore a proud grin. My grandparents knew little about music and even less about the marching arts, but they knew that their grandson had just accomplished something challenging. I noticed that my grandpa was wearing a Blue Stars hat, and he made a point to show it off, happy to be supporting me in the process.

There are many days on tour when you just want to quit – to leave the discomfort and the demands behind and go home where you can sleep in every day

on a real bed, eat junk food, and not get yelled at all day. It's only a matter of time before each person finds his or her breaking point physically, mentally, or emotionally. Some are unfortunate to find all three at once. There are days when you forget why you signed up for this in the first place.

There are also days when you have a great show in your home stadium and see the pride and joy in your family's eyes – you feel it in their embrace. Those are the days that make the same old routine worth something.

Chapter 6: Minneapolis

We finally arrived in Metamora. I had heard stories all season about this place near the heart of Illinois. In 2011, over half the show changed at this very location. Over 100 sets of drill were rewritten and repped into muscle memory. For the next three days, we would be doing much of the same – changing our ending, learning new drill, reworking music, and enhancing the show with choreography. There had also been stories about the water, and as I filled my jug before rehearsal, they appeared to be true. After just a few inches, I could no longer see into my jug. Instead, the container filled with a pale green liquid. It was sour to the taste and hot on my tongue, but water meant survival, and Metamora was showing no signs of giving us a break from the mid-July heat.

The legend of Metamora compared the grass in the stadium to Onalaska. In an attempt to preserve the stadium for the show in a few days, we stacked along the sideline of a dying grass field outside the school. Mostly dirt and rocks, it provided no cushion as we added our choreography to the show. We added a kneel to a new *Part 5* ending. Dangel, Nate, and I were no longer forced to be bumper cars, but it came at a price. A drum break bumped the tempo up to 212 bpm, the fastest we had been forced to march since Ryan maxed out the Dr. Beat in Sparta, only this time it was required. Rep after rep we knelt, knees digging into the dirt, rocks and other debris penetrating our skin. Any pleas against repetition were struck down, and many knees were soon oozing blood as dirt began to infiltrate the wounds.

Our drill revisions were far fewer than *ReBourne*, ending up with just twenty or so new sets. There was still a lot to clean in the existing drill. We didn't have time

to learn much more. The intensity of rehearsal had taken its toll on several members. Each section had one or two people on the sideline at any given time. Alan had been struggling with an Achilles injury since Forest City. It had never fully healed, and he was in and out of pain each rehearsal. Today was a bad day, and he sat on the sideline, stretching his leg. Others chatted, feeling ill or dealing with their own injuries. The box had had enough. As we set up for a run, Dave grabbed the microphone.

“Hold up. Why are there so many people on the sideline? Are you hurt? If you’re hurt, you need to go home. If not, you need to get in there and get better like everybody else. Everybody sitting out right now, you’re the ones holding us back. You’re the reason we’re stuck in the middle of the pack. If you plan on keeping your spot, get in the drill right now. If you sit out, we’ll have a little talk with Russ and see about getting you a ride home.” The sideline emptied. Taking his spot in the drill, Alan’s face was bright red, but not from the sun. He was cursing under his breath. It was true – a lot of people were sitting out for dumb reasons, but there were just as many people with real injuries fighting to stay in at all costs. After the run, Alan walked with a severe limp, the damage resulting from the run outweighing the benefits of having him in. I felt bad. I could only vaguely imagine what he was going through, and there was nothing I could do to help.

Day one of rehearsal ended, and I discovered that I had left my toiletries in Kalamazoo. I could go three days borrowing soap to shower, but I couldn’t go three days without brushing my teeth. I asked Russ if I could find a gas station to pick up an emergency replacement. After giving me what I hoped was a friendly hard time,

he approved, as long as I did not go alone. Dan agreed to join me, and we started our journey with no idea of where we were headed, struggling to decipher the map on my phone. We walked until we saw heavy traffic passing in the distance and followed the flow of cars. Sure enough, we stumbled upon a gas station, and for the inflated price of five dollars, I got a travel toothbrush and toothpaste. Not wanting to waste the trip, I stocked up Oreos.

Dan and I left the gas station and started back for the school. It was not long before we were enveloped by the dark, empty streets of Metamora. There was just enough light being cast from the moon and the occasional street lamp to see our way through the sleeping community. Somewhere in the distance, a campfire burned. The scent of charred wood hung in the air like the cologne of a passing stranger. My olfactory memory fired into high gear.

Images flashed before me. Coughing, my eyes burning with smoke. I sat beside my dad around the fire, its construction a spontaneous decision. He sat with a beer, opening up about life – his thoughts, ideas, and emotions, the things you could only get around a summer campfire. I drank my Coke and listened, my head falling back, gazing up at the stars. Their light traveled millions of miles so that we could lift our eyes and admire. That light found me walking through Metamora, head back, gazing up at them. I missed my dad. I was living my dream – marching drum corps, performing for thousands, but I missed the simplicities of home. I longed to sit next to my dad as we drove to Lafayette. We usually kept quiet, listening to Car Talk on NPR. That wouldn't bother me. I just wanted to be there, sitting.

Back at the school, I found my bed in the darkness of the gym and settled in for the night. There was plenty left to change to bring *The Blue World* to life. I would need every second of sleep I could get.

Frank told us his own stories about Metamora. Back while he was still marching Star of Indiana, they were housed in Metamora for rehearsal. Always a popular bunch with the locals, the drum corps community seems to draw an interesting amount of negative attention. Star caught the eye of the football coach, furious that a bunch of flamboyant band kids had stolen his field for practice. In the middle of rehearsal, the coach set up and turned on the field's sprinkler system to force the corps out. Though they had done nothing wrong, Star was seen as the antagonist and had to save face with the community to protect their image. Instead of retaliating, the corps put on a show for the town, marching through the streets, playing *Pines of Rome*.

"That's the thing about this activity," Frank explained. "We had every right to be upset with how we were treated – and we were, but instead of acting out against those who wronged us, we took the high road. We made amends for a crime we didn't commit. That's an important lesson for life in general. At some point in the future, without a doubt, you'll find that you've been wronged. You have two choices. You can either stoop down to the level of your aggressor, or you can display your character. Drum corps taught me what that word is all about. Character. When all is said and done and the season is over, you're going to walk away with some incredible memories and friendships – but how are *you* going to be different

because of this experience? This is more than notes and dots, remember that. On that subject, though, let's clean some notes."

Frank focused a lot on free buzzing, something I couldn't do. My lips moved, and noise was made, but I couldn't control the pitch of my lips without the mouthpiece. I turned to Jakob Wisdom, another rookie and a euphonium major.

"Does it matter that I can't free buzz? Like... I can hit the notes and play the music, I just can't do anything without the mouthpiece."

"You definitely want to try to get better at it. It'll help your range and flexibility. Otherwise, you're relying on the instrument too much. It isn't really you making the choices, the horn is." His answer made sense, but I was getting frustrated. No matter how much progress I made, I was always behind everybody else.

Frank continued to lead our rehearsal, cleaning and adjusting parts in the music. He added an unexpected **bVI** chord to the closer to catch the audience off guard and peak their interest. I loved it. Each moment in *Metamora* was painstakingly detailed, but I felt the improvements around me. It was worth the effort.

At the end of the third day, we were allowed in the stadium for one run through. The grass was long, lush, and healthy – a football player's dream, a marcher's nightmare. Maybe it was the three days of changes, the crisp night air, or the stadium lights, but I was excited for this run. None of the grass horror stories scared me. The following eleven and a half minutes were far from easy, but there was hype in the air around us. We ended that night a closer drum corps, bound by

our shared experiences in Metamora. It was like a mini spring training in the center of the season, holding us together when times got tough. We were stronger, forged by the fires.

I wanted to quit. Drum corps was hard. I was tired of always being tired. I wanted to go home to a life of sleeping in, air conditioning, and junk food. I wanted to get away from the demands and expectations placed on me at all times. I wanted to exist, not excel. I had made a mistake.

We woke up in Minneapolis to the sounds of roof construction that started two hours before we were scheduled to be awake. I tossed and turned, struggling to get back to sleep amidst the sounds of nail guns and heavy footsteps from above. It was another hot and humid day in the Midwest. The air was thick. The field for the day was an overgrown lot between the stadium we did not have access to and the baseball field currently hosting a game. Every now and then, a foul ball would find its way into our rehearsal space – as if drum corps wasn't dangerous enough. With as many encounters with tall grass as we had had, I still struggled to push through its resistance, and the staff wasn't planning to let up just because today was our first Regional.

Erik pushed us through rep after rep of heartbeat drill. The exercise got its name because our path resembled an EKG. It might as well have given me a heart attack. It required a great deal of energy to achieve the correct path and step size in each of the direction changes, especially at the tempos they were running us at. The grass was the cherry on top of a very miserable sundae. We marched until we ran

out of space. They'd cut the met, reset, bump up the tempo, and send us on our way once more. My ability to get through the exercise soon resembled the December camp visual exercise. My feet barely moved in time. I had all but lost the technique. I no longer worried about the things staff shouted at us during the rep. I just needed to keep moving, and I could hardly manage that. I was thirsty. We hadn't gotten water. With the humidity in the air, my sweat could do nothing but cling to my body and roll in heavy beads down my face and neck.

We focused on our bookends, the opener and closer. Set by set, we worked through the drill, striving for as much clarity as we could get with such a short rehearsal.

"Heads up!" A ball landed just off the back sideline. Ralph was on foul patrol, ready to warn us of any dangers. It soon became a game for him, enjoying seeing the hornline scramble and duck out of the way of an imaginary threat. As we continued our *Part 1* emphasis, I found myself staring off into the distance. In just a few hours, we would compete in our first Regional – the first time we would be measured against every other corps by the same panel of judges. Today was the start of the "real" drum corps season, but I wasn't sure I really wanted to be there. My thoughts returned to home, to the simplicity of rural living. Motivation was a struggle. On a water break, as I returned to the field, Crissman called out to me from atop his ladder.

"Ekstrom, come here." My heart stopped. Had he noticed my focus was slipping? I replayed the last few reps in my head, thinking of anything I could have done wrong. He stared down at me from above. "I've been watching you over there

for a while.” He paused. “You look really good. You’re marching well. Keep it up.” He smiled. It was one of the few times I had seen him smile. Zack Crissman had complimented me. It was one of the most meaningful comments I had ever received. I forgot my uncertainty and discomfort. I wasn’t going anywhere. I was in this for the long haul.

After an abbreviated brass warmup, the hornline joined the full corps for ensemble. Things were moving swiftly, and everybody seemed excited for the first big show of the season. Standing in the shark tooth, the last set of *Part 2*, we had been idle for quite some time. Guard and percussion staff gave lots of information to their sections, leaving the hornline to wait. In the distance, I could hear The Boston Crusaders rehearsing *Pines of Rome*. I wondered how close they must be. I had performed the piece at a music camp the summer before, and it brought back many great memories. I joined in the performance, humming.

“Whose show are you more worried about, theirs or ours?” Before I realized Jason had turned to address me, he was facing forward once more, eyes to the box. My face reddened with embarrassment. I looked up to Jason, and he had scolded me for being foolish. He was right. I was giving more attention to BAC than I was my own staff. I needed the discipline to tune out anything that wasn’t helping me get better. I wasn’t there yet. I remained silent for the rest of the rehearsal.

TCF Bank Stadium was much bigger than I had imagined. Not a fan of college athletics, I knew little about the University of Minnesota. I had seen photos of the stadium when researching our performance venues for the summer, but to see the it

in person was different. This was no Scheumann Stadium. This entire stadium was for college? I struggled to take it all in. For Alex Bauer, another rookie, this was just another day at his college stadium – his Muncie.

The staging area under the stadium was larger than most freestanding buildings. I paced anxiously back and forth in the open space. I never understood how some members could be so relaxed before shows. My brain was computing everything that had happened during rehearsal, keeping my memory engaged so I missed nothing. I didn't get how some people could be joking around one moment and engaged for the show the next. I wasn't prepared to flip the switch. I always kept it on.

"Please welcome to the field from La Crosse, Wisconsin – The Blue Stars!" My heart skipped a beat. It was Brandt Crocker. For years, I had heard his voice announce every corps in existence. I could imitate each unique inflection he used for each corps. As a fan, he was as much of the drum corps experience as the corps themselves, and he had just announced our entrance. It was all too real.

"Look for the box, guys," Chris instructed as we marched by. "It's higher than what we've had so far, so be ready." I stole a glance towards the crowd, larger than any we had had so far this season. The press box itself was higher than most of the venues we had been in. It struck me again that all this was for a college. For now, it was all for The Blue Stars. I took my spot and practiced popping to the box a few times before turning from the crowd. The sun beat down from above. We were an early performance. There was no relief from the heat of midday, and long sleeves

did nothing to help. Today's struggle would be the weather, but today's boost would be the Regional hype and the cheers of thousands of happy drum corps fans.

The heat weighed me down the entire show. While my legs got around the field and my fingers played the music in time, I was having a constant battle in my head, forcing my body not to give up. *But it's hard.* It's what you signed up for. *It's hot.* And? *Can we have a break?* This is a show! *So? I'm tired.* Dammit, you better keep pushing. *Ugh.*

There's not much that compares to the cheers from a crowd that size. It felt good to know we had done our job, but I was overwhelmed with fatigue, disoriented by the heat. As we left the stadium, I fought to bring my heart rate down. We kept marching, searching for an appropriate spot to circle up for dismissal. All around us, other corps buzzed back and forth in preparation for their own performances. The chaos was a stark contrast to the schedules and precision inside the stadium. It amazed me that the two worlds could exist so close to one another. The routine of the performance is merely a respite from the chaos in the lot.

A proud Blue Star, I no longer held other corps in a higher regard, but I was still a fan of the activity, and I wanted to see what other corps were creating artistically. There were bound to be great musical choices that I wanted to know about as a future educator. I changed, throwing on my corps jacket, and headed back to the stadium.

Someone had once suggested that I buy all my Regional patches as soon as possible in case they ran out. I visited the DCI booth. They had everything I needed. For me, the patches and memorabilia were as important as the performance, serving

as physical reminders of meaningful life experiences. I left the booth with patches for World Class, all the Regionals, and the 40th anniversary pin. I charged it, hoping my parents wouldn't mind.

I reached the stands just in time for intermission, securing a seat for the top six. I watched their shows, knowing that I worked just as hard as they had. What, then, made them different? Prestige? Show design? Money? I had no idea. All I knew was that I wanted the same recognition they got. People cheer louder for the top six – they look forward to the shows more. Those corps sell the tickets. I felt undervalued by the crowd I now sat in. I had felt the energy of their cheers, but hearing them explode as Carolina Crown took the field, I realized that they had given nothing more than apathy.

When The Blue Devils took the field, the crowd was reserved. Historically, BD has been hated for their success and their recent transition to the abstract. I couldn't say that I completely disagreed, but this year I hesitated to pass judgment so soon. Isaac Lee was one of the drum majors, and I had recently connected with him. The two of us spoke briefly during a conference call while Jonathan Doerr and I threw around ideas for how to manage a drill writing company he had invited me to join. He and Isaac were partners on another project – The Guardians, a drum corps Jonathan was creating. Isaac and I had kept in touch online since then, and I had followed his posts on tour. I was prepared for the abstract. I kept my mind open. I was in no way prepared for what I witnessed. I sent him a text after the show.

“With all due respect to the corps' performance tonight, what the hell did I just watch? I'm so confused....” My stomach growled. I checked my phone. I still had

time to look for a gas station and make it back to the bus. I hurried out of the stadium. After several minutes of aimless wandering and a quick chat with a police officer for directions, I found my dealer. With the simple swipe of a card, I had my post-show Oreos once more.

On my way back to the bus, I got a reply from Isaac.

“Haha... yeah. We get that a lot this year.” A sudden pang from my abdomen reminded me to use the restroom before getting on the bus. I made a break for the stadium. As I climbed the stairs towards the main concourse, waves of people passed in the opposite direction. I felt like a salmon headed to spawn. As I neared my destination, I spotted Mike Halron on his way out. He gave me a smile, thumbs up, and congratulations. He saw the confusion on my face.

“Didn’t you hear the scores? You guys are in 11th – above Spirit.” I smiled. The Blue Stars were in a Finals spot. All that was left was to climb higher. We were back.

Chapter 7: Texas

The road to San Antonio began in Olathe, Kansas, and it appeared to be lined with ankle-high grass. From the end zone, we watched the Madison Scouts struggle through the jungle on the field. I couldn't see their shoes, but I could see the horror on their faces – the fight to keep moving through the resistance. My mind brought back memories of Onalaska. I was stronger now, but most of our shows had been turf, and even the grass fields like Mankato had been good to us. This field looked angry, its blades of grass knotted, pulling against the feet attempting to cut through its grip.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Madison Scouts!” The crowd uttered an apathetic applause as our opponents from Wisconsin left the field, shaken by their recent experience. It was our turn to tackle the menacing sod.

“...from La Crosse, Wisconsin, The Blue Stars!” I may as well have been equipped with a putter; the crowd offered only golf claps. As the show began, I promised myself I would use the technique we had learned. That was the only way to get better – a Box 5 *always* mentality. Reaching the end of the opener, I popped my horn to the box, belted out my A-flat, and snapped my horn down with a desperate aggression.

I am going to die. For the next ten minutes, survival was my only concern. My lower body was a Cavalier, yet I still struggled to push through the grass's death grip. Gasping, taxed by the resistance, I struggled to play. This was Onalaska all over again, but now I expected better of myself. There were no excuses this time.

We left the field in an uncomfortable silence. The unspoken energy that normally passed between members was absent, each person standing with their own thoughts. I hated myself for giving up. I hadn't even tried to fight.

"Standby." Zack's statuesque gaze fell on Russ who had entered the gathering. His face scrunched up, thinking. He was silent for quite some time.

"You know, some shows you just don't need to say anything. You'll have performances that are spectacular and there are no words to describe them, but I think we can all agree that what happened tonight sucked." Russ was hardly subtle. "But figure out why it sucked, and tomorrow we get better." With that, we were left once more to our thoughts. I returned to the bus in silence, disgusted with what I had done in competition.

"I want to tell you guys a story." Russ addressed the corps the next night as we circled up in Bentonville, Arkansas. "During EPL, some guys were playing basketball in the gym, and I joined in with them. Now it may surprise you to know that I'm not the most athletic individual, but I was really struggling. I missed every shot I took. Finally, I looked at them, and I said, 'I *am* going to make this shot,' and what happened, anybody who was there?"

"You made the basket."

"You're damn right I made it!" Russ' voice shook, his volume rising. The simple story had evolved into a passionate speech with no sign of slowing down. "Last night we missed the shot. We lobbed one up there, and it didn't hit anything." His eyes scanned the circle, boring holes in each person his gaze fell upon. "Tell

yourselves right now, *'I am going to make this shot!'* Go out there and give everything you have. Be focused. Be controlled. Enjoy being amazing!"

We took the field, my feet gliding across the turf. The press box rose high above Tiger Stadium, its glass façade twinkling under the lights of the stadium.

"Your bells are going to the balcony at the center of the box. You'll see the judges up there. Have a great show, Blue Stars." Chris ushered us onto the field, giving us our focal point. I was ready to throw down.

At the release of the last chord, the crowd was on its feet – one of our first standing ovations of the season. I tried to look serious and intimidating under my shako, but I couldn't help but grin from ear to ear. I felt great about the performance we gave, and the buzzing energy between performers confirmed this.

I heard our score from a gas station parking lot a few blocks from the stadium. On my way to buy my Oreos and milk, I had just arrived when numbers boomed through the clear night air. Score after score, I held my breath, relieved when another corps was announced. We came in second, placing only behind Carolina Crown. We made the shot.

Texas was a miserable state. It was hot, there were giant bugs everywhere, and the food truck ran out of pancakes and waffles for breakfast – perhaps that's part of the reason why Sam Rusch ate a cricket before rehearsal. This was definitely going to be a gallon challenge day. We had two days in Denton, a rehearsal day and a show day. We were reaching the level of clarity where the staff could get pickier with their comments, which meant we stopped more often. The standards were

higher. We got away with less. The intensity was building. I had the sudden realization that the horn was no longer heavy. Without having to focus on the weight, rehearsal started to suck less, but less than a lot still sucks.

I stepped onto the turf for visual. It was like stepping onto a skillet. As per usual, my ankles burned as they absorbed the heat from the turf. I had gotten lazy with my sunscreen at that point. I put on just enough to keep from burning painfully, but I accepted the glowing pink color that was my ginger-skinned “tan.” I was going to sweat it off before we got to basics anyway.

We spent almost the entire block cleaning the new ending to *Part 4*. The rewrite had a twelve-count block rotation with no defined midsets. The whole transition looked like a blob as the forms condensed and rotated to their new positions. To make the rotation look clean, we needed to force subsets. We ran the segment over and over, count by count, letting the visual staff get a chance to see everything in slow motion, looking for a count to place the subset. The lines weren’t quite vertical on count six, but it was decided that they would need to be. Line by line, the field staff began creating new lines, shaping the rotations and assigning new dots. We would take it back and run the six counts again. Problems were addressed, dots were moved, and we’d do it again. Somebody noticed that the diagonals in each block could be read from the front. Again, there was no clean midset count for these to hit, so we forced a midset on count three. Over two hours went by this way. When all was said and done, I was no longer taking an even path with equal steps to my dot. Going between dots, I waited to hit the cover on count three, took smaller steps so I didn’t overshoot my cover on count six, then opened up the step size to hit the

written dot on count twelve. Our efforts were not in vain. The transition looked great. We just had to get the other 200 sets to look just as good.

The best part about Texas was that they loved football, and that meant that each stadium was turf with a box that you had to aim your bell at God to reach. As the bus pulled into the lot at C.H. Collins Stadium, the outdoor athletic venue for the Denton ISD, this was obviously true. The home stand's façade rivaled Ball State's Scheumann Stadium. I never knew high school football could be played on such an impressive stage. Across the parking lot was the Gonzalez School for Children. The sign out front cycled through several messages including the date, time, and temperature. I read it wrong the first time. I thought it said 108 degrees. When it completed a cycle, I was sickened to see that it was in fact 108 degrees. This is how I was going to die. Heat exhaustion, sweating to death in a band uniform.

We found some shade under the awning of the school. The staff did everything they could to keep us in that shade for as long as possible. When we were finished stretching, we had no choice but to march in the sun. There were a couple areas left that were still covered with shade, and we positioned ourselves in these small patches of heaven until it was our time to march. As we wrapped up our visual warmup, Bluecoats appeared, rounding the corner of the school only to meet the sad realization that we had the only shade available at the show site.

Ryan returned us to the shade for brass. We abandoned the arc in favor of a blob that kept us out of the sun. The staff made sure we had plenty of time to hydrate. I was sweating enough that I didn't need to worry about using the restroom. The water never had a chance to get to my bladder. Ryan was giving

instructions, but we weren't focused. He followed our gazes over his shoulder to the Bluecoats rehearsing across the drive.

"Okay, listen up. That's my corps over there, but you know what? Screw them. We are here to do *our* job. Let them do their thing. We're going to do ours. I need your focus. *Now!*" I did my best to ignore them, but caught myself glancing over throughout the warmup. Just before leaving for the gate, we performed *Jewish Chorale*. We played our corps song at the Bluecoats. Though we weren't slotted in the same bracket, we made a statement before collecting our things and leaving. I hoped they had paid attention.

The temperature had cooled off during our warmup. It was only 103 degrees now. As we neared the stands, I understood how large the stadium was. I'm not a fan of cliché's, but everything really was bigger in Texas. Stepping onto the field, the turf confused me. It wasn't the usual blades of synthetic grass filled with tire shavings. It was flat with textured bumps that I assumed were supposed to be "grass". It reminded me of floral foam, only it didn't disintegrate the moment you touched it. The surface was spongy but supportive. It was hot as hell, but it was going to be a piece of cake for my lower body. Texas knew how to do everything, even turf.

We had one of the best crowd reactions of the season. The performance was electric. Things we focused on during rehearsal showed up in the performance. I found my covers in the *Part 4* rotations with ease. At the end of the show, I had enough adrenaline to do the show again, but as we left the field, my body remembered it was running low on water. We arced up outside the stadium, waiting in silence for the drum majors to call us to standby. Sweat dripped from the brim of

my shako. Droplets raced down my neck. I was seeing spots. I did everything I could to control my breathing, hoping to maintain consciousness. It wasn't unheard of for members to pass out after shows, but I managed to stay on my feet. I glanced towards the school. According to the sign, the temperature had dropped to a cool 101 degrees. Good thing I was wearing my uniform, or I might have gotten cold.

I sat on the curb eating dinner from the food truck. My friend Stephanie Suhr, a mellophone player, joined me.

"How was your show," she asked.

"It was pretty good, actually. I thought I was going to die it was so hot, but I didn't really have a bad run. *Part 5* is still rough, but it's getting closer. How was your run?" She lowered her food and looked at me. She said nothing – just stared.

"I haven't been on the field in two weeks. Myles is marching my spot." I became incredibly uncomfortable.

"Wait – what happened?"

"My hip. I can't march anymore. I've been running the met. Mello Myles took my spot. He's been marching it for the last two weeks." I didn't know what to say. I hadn't noticed this change, and I felt terrible. Here was Stephanie, unable to do what she paid and trained to do, and I had reminded her that her season on the field was over. Even when I was trying to be nice I ended up being an asshole. I finished eating and headed back to the stadium to escape the discomfort I had just created. Perhaps watching BD again would give me enough to focus on so I could take my mind off of the news I had received. It did.

I watched the confusingly busy production of *Cabaret Voltaire* for the second time, closer now. I saw young adults like me committed to their performance. There was energy to the show – an investment in every detail’s success from the members, something I had yet to do in my own show. I wasn’t thriving. I was still surviving. I wanted to be like the performers I saw on the field, but as a Blue Star.

We lost fifteen minutes of breakfast for the rest of the season. It was the first of three days at the San Antonio housing site - rehearsal, the Regional, and the San Antonio free day. Mark led our stretch in visual, sharing stories from his previous four years in the corps. Dave Cantoni, an old-school, hard-ass visual tech hated the idea that the corps was losing fifteen minutes of rehearsal to stretch.

“There’s no reason why you can’t wake up, do everything you need to do in the morning, and eat in under 45 minutes.” Ideally he was right, but mornings were one of the few times I felt relaxed in my routine – when I could actually enjoy the time I had. Dave was taking some of that away. His plan would return five hours of visual rehearsal to the remainder of our tour schedule, but it also cost us five hours of already limited freedom. The responses were mixed, but generally negative. Dave didn’t seem to care.

The Texas heat continued to overwhelm. I had to remind myself that these upper 90’s were better than Whitewater, WI when the heat and turf combined to create rehearsal conditions of 114 degrees on the field. At that point, I wasn’t so much sweating as I was leaking water. San Antonio should have felt like a break, but my body didn’t view it that way. It was hot and tired. The field we rehearsed on was

75% dirt, 15% grass, and 10% small rocks. A cloud of dust hung above the field after each rep. I could taste it in my mouth. Grit filled my nostrils. Texas still sucked.

Robert Fitzsimmons was the first to pass out during breathing gym. We had just begun power breathing when a dull thud and concerned looks led my gaze to a collapsed Robbie. As he slowly regained consciousness, he seemed embarrassed. I could understand his concern, but I was also impressed. I had collapsed several times, but I never passed out. I admired his use of air.

“Yeah, Robbie?” The bari/euphs joked with him as he recovered, but we were glad he was okay. Still fighting injuries, we had yet to have a show with no holes. The last thing we needed was another person out.

Brass block deteriorated from there. The bari/euphs were playing a game called “pass the missed release around the section.” The only rule was that it couldn’t be the same person twice, that way the staff could never fix the problem.

“Guys, stop missing releases.” Sean Breast, the vet in charge of the thirds was becoming more irritated. A bari/euph missed almost every release. Telling us to stop missing things wasn’t working. I wondered why he didn’t go down the line, surveying the section, standing in different spots until he could locate the culprits. *“If I were a section leader,”* I thought, *“that’s what I’d do.”*

The lack of discipline continued. As a result, the section stayed after rehearsal, sustaining pitches with Mark, watching for his cutoff. Even in an environment where we had nothing else to think about but the cutoff, there were hangovers every couple of reps. Tensions rose, causing more errors. The process snowballed. This wasn’t even about music anymore. It was about mental stamina.

We were just minutes away from being released for lunch and a laundry block, and some people were already there, making productivity impossible for the rest of us. I walked away from that rehearsal frustrated, knowing that my success was negated by the mistakes of others. I hoped laundry would clear our heads and bring us back to ensemble focused and ready to improve. At the very least, we would come back with a less nauseating odor.

We listened to Richard Saucedo's judge tape on the ride to the laundromat. For twelve minutes, we heard one of the greatest minds in the activity tear apart our performance, calling out mistake after mistake. It was a humbling tape, but few of the members were engaged in listening to it. That was part of our problem.

Twenty minutes into our drive, we merged onto the interstate. Nobody knew where we were going. An hour later, we found ourselves at a laundromat outside San Antonio with less than two hours to finish fifty loads of laundry. To make things more interesting, volunteers from The Academy were already occupying half the building, laundering their uniform shirts. We would not be on time. I shoved all my clothes into a single washer, fed in my quarters, and went exploring for food.

Our bus was the last to arrive at the school. Ensemble had already started. We frantically unloaded our laundry and grabbed our equipment, scrambling to get to rehearsal "on time." Recognizing that we had missed dinner, Russ set aside time for the brass bus to go eat a small meal before returning for the last block of the day. I was starving, but I felt like the staff expected us to rehearse. I stayed put. As we broke from rewarm, Zack gathered us together. He looked upset. His characteristic

expression of stern cynicism was intensified by something he had been keeping to himself but needed to let out.

“Do you guys know what happens on Saturday for the corps who don’t make Finals?” There was silence. “They march in a parade.” Zack always terrified me, but in this moment, I wished I had left to eat food. “I didn’t pay three thousand dollars to march in a freaking parade. I don’t think any of you did, either.” He said nothing else. For the first time, I thought about the reality Zack had just proposed. We were sitting in 11th place with just over three weeks left in the season. Nothing was guaranteed. We weren’t promised a spot in Finals just for being The Blue Stars. Other corps could get away on their reputation alone. We could not. Zack’s words clung to me as I prepped for ensemble, the dust and the setting sun obscuring my view of the field, Mark’s hands, and everything I thought I had known to be true.

The Alamodome came into view on the horizon. The bus filled with the chant *home show, dome show*. I had been in domes before, but not with a show like *The Blue World*. For the last several days, Ryan and the brass staff had reminded us to trust our eyes, not our ears. The reverb in the dome could easily cause an ensemble tear if we let our brains adjust what we played to match what we heard.

Outside the dome, the asphalt baked us as we stretched under the sun, relentlessly beating down from a cloudless sky. My horn was hot to the touch. The water in my jug was warm and uninviting, but I drank it. My success depended on it. The staff patrolled the lot, searching for better real estate that would soon be on the market as corps started their journey toward the Texas landmark looming nearby.

They squeezed us into the shade on the east side of a small building. It was just enough. It was days like today that I remembered they knew we were people. The staff usually frustrated me. They pushed the corps to its limits and further, never letting up. When nobody else wanted to keep going, they were there to force us forward or drag us behind them as they powered towards their goals. Even the smallest blessing, like shade for a show warmup, was a reminder of humanity.

A cold blast of air hit my face. There was a business at the entrance to the dome that reminded me of a beehive. To our left, Spirit was filtering into the tunnel, preparing to take the field. To our right, Glassmen were leaving, their faces flushed, sweat dripping from their shakos. We were suspended, motionless, in the middle. For a few moments, we simply existed. I could relax. The bari/euphs took a photo with Matt Becker, one of our most energetic music techs. He was leaving us. It felt weird to lose a tech. Day after day, the same faces surrounded us, and then suddenly one would disappear to the real world, leaving an uncomfortable void that took far too long to feel normal.

“3...2...1”

“*F...C...Oooooooo!*” We made our way through the corridors. As we passed the tunnel on the front sideline, I could see Spirit in full performance mode. They seemed oddly distant. Tens of thousands of faces watched them from the stands. The only sound came from the reverb of what had been a large impact. There was a dull roar from the crowd. Whatever sounds were out there weren’t making it through the tunnel. I passed the opening, and they disappeared from sight. My blinders were now on. My race was Blue Stars.

Taking the field was like stepping into a vacuum. A whirlwind of sound filled the vast space overhead, a mix of an anxious crowd, advertisements, and Dan Potter. His words were incomprehensible. I could only tell by his inflection and the rush from the crowd that he had just announced our entrance. It was immediately clear why the brass staff stressed the hands so much coming into this show. I could hardly hear the main PA system used for the massive stadium. There was no way I was going to hear something coming from 40 yards away.

I took off on my jazz run-a-thon. The design team had added props to the field, two of which were in my line of travel. I had to be creative getting to my dots, jazz running through a rock and a buoy before circling around a flat, jumping over guard equipment with Eddie Moore.

Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock. I was stronger now. I push more air. Belting out my F, I hesitated. Nobody else was playing. No, there were definitely other sounds, but why were they so quiet? I brought my dynamic down, trying not to stick out. A frenzy of sounds struck my senses. *Where is the pulse?* My mind went into overdrive. *Find the hands. Hands. Hands. Hands.* Nothing I played matched anything around me. I wasn't sure if this was the dome, me, or both, but I knew I didn't like it. The show was a twelve-minute sensory overload. Domes were weird. I hated Texas.

The scores that came in that night weren't good. We had dropped to 12th, over half a point behind Blue Knights. Just 0.4 behind us was Crossmen. How they could even be near us was beyond me. I felt sick on the drive back to the school. I thought about what Zack had told us the day before. Corps that don't make Finals march a parade. We were in an uncomfortable spot. I felt like the swimmer on the

cover of *Jaws*. Lurking beneath us was a shark, waiting to strike. We had to swim faster.

“Get up! Wake up! C’mon, let’s go!” Mark was flipping mattresses. It was almost ten. I hadn’t slept in this late all tour, and for the first time it was allowed. It was Sunday – the San Antonio Free Day. Members competing in I&E had already left. I chose to sleep in with the majority of the corps. Mark wanted us up and out. “The sooner you get up and going, the sooner we can leave. The sooner we leave, the more free time we have. Get up!” I begrudgingly rose, stiff and sore as usual. Today was for fun – we were expected to get our gifts for Christmas in July, but it was also an opportunity for physical and mental recovery.

Rolling down the interstate, The Alamodome once again came into view. I looked down at my sandals, khaki shorts, and t-shirt. It felt strange to be dressed like a real person. I had spent the last nine weeks either shirtless with commando athletic shorts or in compression gear and my snug uniform. This regular comfort was uncomfortable. The bus came to a stop outside Rivercenter Mall. Joseph released us for the day with his favorite chant. *Who dat say they gonna’ beat the Blue Stars?*

I joined a group headed to Fuddruckers before seeing *The Dark Knight Rises*. I wasn’t sure what else to do. I got along with most of the hornline, but I still didn’t have much of a connection with anybody but Dan and Alan. They were not planning to see the movie, making me the thirteenth wheel of another close bunch. I tried to stay out of the way. Once in the theater, I sank into the deep cushions of the chair,

rocking back and forth slowly. In the dim lights, the comfort mixed with my fatigue, and I began to drift. I questioned how I was able to push my body so hard every day and keep going. Newton's First Law.

In the middle of the movie, Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character reached out to a boy whose brother was found dead outside a tunnel.

"You know what he was doing down there in the tunnels?"

"A lot of guys been going down the tunnels when they age out." The theater rang with cheers and laughter. Filled almost entirely by drum corps kids, we had a very real connection to the term "age out." In just three short weeks, the DCI Class of 2012 would celebrate their final days on the field. Batman was getting a little too real.

I spent too much on my meal at the Lone Star Café. At that point, I figured I might as well stick with the trend. I was nearing forty dollars on the day, and we hadn't stopped for ice cream or Christmas presents yet. I was charging it all. My parents were going to hate me. We sat overlooking the River Walk. I wasn't sure why people hyped the river so much. I had grown up on the Iroquois. The River Walk was like putting a sidewalk on the sides of a dirty ditch. As long as we were in Texas, I wasn't going to be happy. I stuffed my face with country-fried steak before lumbering back to the bus. The ageouts were the last to return after a day of hearty drinking. The life of an ageout seemed much simpler. I tried to imagine what my corps experience would be like in two years – the 2014 DCI summer tour. I couldn't.

After one final stop at Buc-ee's, the largest, most Texas truck stop I had ever seen (Does everything *have* to be so big? What are you guys compensating for?), the

bus set off on a six-hour drive east into the dirty south. First stop: Louisiana. I had heard bad things about this leg of tour, dubbed “Swamp Tour.” I closed my eyes, hoping to remain comatose for the rest of the trip. I was sure I could survive the south. Anything had to be better than Texas.

Chapter 8: Swamp Tour

“Welcome to the most miserable place on Earth.” I looked out my window, seeing nothing. There was one security light outside the school, and by its faint glow, I could just make out the condensation clinging to the bus. Once suspended helplessly in the air, it now had a place to rest. I stepped out of the frigid bus AC and into the moist night air. It was thick and heavy, trying to weigh me down. Inside the school was no better. There was no AC. The small gym had just enough space for the court. We piled our bags in heaps, trying to conserve precious floor space. I was practically sharing a bed with the guys around me. Looking across the gym, the girls had it just as bad. For the first time all summer, they didn’t have half a gym to sprawl out on. We were literal sardines in a hot, wet can. My sleeping bag was useless. I wanted nothing on me. Fatigue was my only salvation, pulling me back into sleep.

I had not opened my eyes, but I could hear Megan’s voice.

“The fields are all mud, so be careful. Also, there are fire ants and dead frogs all over the place, so it might be a good idea to leave your backpacks in here so they don’t get ruined. Welcome to the south!” This had to be some sick joke. There was no way anybody willingly lived here. I took her advice and left my backpack in the gym, leaving for breakfast. It was far from “sunny” out, a solid layer of clouds covered us, but the sun had only made it more miserable. I was going to drown just trying to breathe. The ground was spongy under my feet, leaving muddy streaks in the grass as I walked. The school refused to let us use their stadium. I didn’t blame them. We would have immediately ruined it. Instead, we got an open field behind the school, bordered with homes. Fenced in one yard, watching us from just beyond

the end zone were three alpacas. Or were they llamas? I had never known the difference. They sat, observing our visual rehearsal.

Basics were a giant game of “avoid standing on an ant hill.” It was impossible. Somebody always ended up in the warning circle drawn by field lining. I felt something crunch beneath my foot. I looked down. Staring up at me with lifeless eyes was a boated, rotten frog. It was Monday. We were stuck down here until we left the Georgia Dome on Saturday. I embraced my fate, accepting that the south had to be miserable – a drum corps rite of passage. The portion of the field used for basics was now sloppy and unusable. Ralph moved on to drill. There were several things to clean at the beginning of *Part 4*, and we didn’t have much time left before brass. I ran to the sideline to get my dot book from my backpack. My heart stopped. Taking Megan’s advice, I left my backpack inside, but I had failed to take with me the things I would need for rehearsal. The gym was too far to run to before we started. I didn’t want to tell Mike I had messed up. Everybody was in a bad mood already. I carefully approached the scaffolding, staring at Ralph until we made eye contact.

“Yes?”

“Sir, I left my dot book in the gym. Would you like me to go get it? I promise you I have every dot memorized.” I wasn’t lying. I started listing my dots back to him for the first sets of *Part 4*. He waved me away. I would be fine. Grabbing my horn from the stack, I new I had dodged a bullet. I felt naked without my dot book, and it felt like everybody was staring at the spot on my hip where it should have been. Nobody said anything. We kept rehearsing.

“Why haven’t you filled your water jug?” It was Dan Smith asking the questions this time. Michael Gold continued to dodge the question. Water was something Dan took seriously. He went through more than anybody, and as he confronted Michael in that moment, he was unnaturally aggressive. “Dude, go fill your water jug. Are you stupid? You need to drink.” Dan’s voice was rising, continuing his assault as he followed Michael onto the field. Mike appeared, shoving Dan aside.

“What the hell, man? What’s your problem? Who’s the leader of this section, huh?” His face was flushed. He demanded an answer.

“You are.” Dan’s eyes were at the ground.

“Exactly, so shut your mouth, and bring any problems to me.” He stormed off, returning to his spot in the drill. I had not yet had a good experience since we arrived in the south. I imagined it watching us, laughing as it got under our skin, tearing us apart from within.

Our time in Louisiana stretched on. After playing so loudly in brass block that we got the group of alpacas to stand up and run away, our ensemble rehearsal was rained out. The extra time was added to EPL, and we’d need it. The men’s locker room was no larger than the standard dorm room. It had two toilets – neither with doors, and the line to the showers cut them off from the sink. It didn’t matter. No water came from the faucet. There were no lights. The shower had four heads. One did nothing, one trickled frigid water down the wall (I got that one), and the other two were tucked away in the corner. In the shadows lurked a blob of unknown origin. Almost otherworldly, we named it “the alien”. I did my best to get clean, but

my white towel turned black as I dried off. I was still covered in dirt. The shower had done nothing. I threw on my shorts and headed to the cook truck. A group of three or four guys were already showering with the hose, smiling as I joined them.

After the show that night, we exchanged Christmas in July gifts. Just before San Antonio, I had drawn Jen Bruijn's name. In her third year with the corps, Jen had been my drill partner while we learned the opener. She went down with an injury and lost her drill spot, but she had stayed on tour as a conductor. Jen had hearing aids in both ears. Every now and then the staff would give her instructions, and in return, she would stare blankly, the batteries having gone bad.

It was my turn to share. I headed to the front of the bus with the gift I had picked up at CVS after the show while getting my Oreos and milk.

"Okay, I had Jen. Now, we know that you're always running the met for battery rehearsals. The met is loud. Drums are loud. I'd hate for you to go deaf, so I got you these earplugs." I grinned. I thought it was clever, or at least a break in the monotony of gifts bought from Spencer's – the one-stop shop for humor tees and things shaped like penises.

We rolled through the south for the rest of the week, stopping for shows in Mississippi. During ensemble in Ocean Springs, Ryan called our attention to a lone individual at the top of the stands.

"Everybody, say 'hi' to Dell."

"Hi, Dell." Who the hell was Dell? He shouted back at us.

"You guys sound good, I'll tell you what." No, really. Who was this guy? He followed us around the state. After the show in Hattiesburg, he pulled us aside just

outside the stadium. As he spoke, Dan paced anxiously. He had needed to pee since warmup.

“Hoo-eee, that’s the best twelve minutes of drum corps I’ve ever seen. You’re communicating. You’re expressive. You look good. You sound good. I can’t wait to see what you do the next two weeks.” Spirit passed by, their show finished. Dell continued to speak. The next corps filtered by our circle. BD, the final show of the evening, was preparing to take the field.

“Well, I want to thank you guys for your time. It’s been exciting seeing what you’re capable of. You’re in good hands. Have a great season.” To this day, I still have no idea who Dell was. Dan took off for a porta potty in agony. I inhaled the warm smell of incense as I passed the BD front ensemble, wishing them well. There was no harm in giving them good luck. They were no threat to us.

When we pulled into our Atlanta housing site, I was too tired to inflate my air mattress. I threw down my things, unrolled my sleeping bag, and collapsed onto the floor. The concrete beneath me was oddly soft, comforting my aching body. I woke the next morning sore and stiff, my back giving me spasms of pain. Something had changed during the night. The concrete was no longer soft and supportive. It dug into my hips, pressing against my weight.

We had two rehearsal days to get better. Our results in San Antonio had not been pleasant, and the shows since then were mixed. Atlanta would be our only chance to see how we compared after a week of cleaning. Today was the day the

staff rolled out a series of new changes, mostly musical. We split into subs to review the changes. Brian walked us through the revisions.

“Okay, so. Look at *Part 2*. You know those runs after your little feature? Yeah, those are gone. You’ll just be playing beats two and four now. Done. Next one. Five bars after letter ‘O.’ Got it? We’ll be adding a measure of 4/4. Rest on beats one and two. On three and four play the note you have the measure before; we’re just making that phrase longer. The judges think that moment is too abrupt, and it doesn’t line up with the visual.” We went through the whole show this way, carefully constructing a more interesting performance.

I had learned to stop forming personal opinions on changes. Russ was a change I once hated and now loved. In Madison, we had turned the beginning of the ballad to face the end zone. I thought it was a stupid idea. The sound it created was ethereal and serene. I didn’t bother trying to evaluate the changes now made. I simply played what I was told.

The other main focus of rehearsal was choreography. Michael Shapiro was in to work with the guard, and he would be working with the hornline on choreography in the ballad as well as at the start of the show for low brass. The number one rule from vets and staff alike was to not ask questions. Michael had a very specific instructional process, and he would likely answer any question during the course of his teaching. Too often, members would remind him that they were holding instruments or wearing shakos – as if he were too ignorant to take that into consideration. It was best to remain silent. After all, this was the mind behind the

greatest Blue Star shows ever put on the field and the innovative guard work each year. If we followed his instructions we would be successful.

When the time came, there was an uneasy silence over the hornline. He addressed the low brass first, guiding us through our new opening poses. I observed his teaching. He was thorough, detailed, and thoughtful. I did my best to copy his gestures. Watching, he would provide assistance when needed, but we had much more to do. His job was to teach, not clean. We moved on.

“No, it’s 1, 2 – *AND*, 3...”

“I promise you, it’s 1, 2, 3, *4-and*, 1.” A sudden rainstorm had kept us inside with nowhere to rehearse for much of ensemble. With just over an hour left in ensemble and no lights on the field, the decision was made to rehearse the new ballad body in the parking lot. The problem: nobody could agree which counts the movements were on. Efforts by the visual staff to come to a decision were futile. Somebody was always upset, claiming that it negated what Shapiro had told them. I could hardly do the motions, let alone argue counts. I splashed my foot in an oily puddle, waiting for my reflection to return. It was getting dark. Another heavy storm was on its way. I felt like I might actually be getting worse. I sang halfheartedly through the ballad with accompanying motions, doing my best to stay in time. Being the tip of the form was great, but I was so far from the information, I struggled to keep up. My morale dropped with the sun.

Rain came down hard that evening. Flashes of lighting lit up the sky like a strobe. It had been a while since I called home, and sitting against a wall, I listened

to my dad discuss what had happened at home since we last spoke. There wasn't much, but I enjoyed the time with him on the line. As we talked, I picked at a toenail. It had died long ago, unable to survive the toll drum corps takes on your feet. Thick and black, it showed signs of being ready to fall off. I tested its strength as my dad got ready for bed, ending our chat. I grabbed my toenail clippers, examining the damage.

My feet were mangled and calloused. My heels had dried out, and large chunks of skin were breaking off, leaving visible, crater-like holes. The nails that weren't already dead were dying. I took the clippers to the worst of them. The clipping disintegrated, freeing the rest of the nail to break free. It tore off with little resistance. Beneath it was a healthy, fully-grown nail. It had been there, hidden, waiting for its opportunity to take responsibility for whatever it is that toenails do. I cleaned up the mess I had made, grabbed my phone, and headed to bed, collapsing on the floor. Whatever argument my body and the concrete had that morning had been forgotten. I closed my eyes, accepting the sleep that was soon on its way.

No lot had been hotter than Atlanta. Arced on the blacktop, we warmed up in more ways than one. I eyed the billowing white roof of the dome. I knew how cool it would be inside, and I wanted it. I oiled my valves before stepping off the bus, but the heat was too much for the metal. They expanded, seizing up, rendering my horn useless. I poured water into the horn through my mouthpiece, hoping to contract them enough to facilitate movement. The process repeated all around me as

bari/euphs emptied their horns of water, the liquid evaporating the moment it hit the pavement.

Nobody watched our rehearsal. Tucked away in the far corner by some small trees for what little shade they provided, we were as far from the stadium as we could get. Nobody wanted to venture that far to see the Blue Stars hornline. It was calm, but it was also lonely. I wanted to be the corps that fans looked for in the lot, hoping to catch a glimpse of our rehearsal. I wanted YouTube to be filled with videos of our warmups. We continued in isolation.

"You're about fifteen cents sharp. Pull out." Ryan moved on from me to tune the next person. I pulled at my main tuning slide. It didn't budge. I tried pushing it. Nothing. I hit it a few times with no success. He turned back, eyeing me. I pretended to pull my slide out, giving him a nod when I finished. He moved on, suspecting nothing. I made a mental note to play flat.

It was a long journey to the dome. Weaving around other corps and through spectators, I did my best to command their attention as we passed. If they wouldn't go out of their way to give us attention in the lot, I'd give them no choice. I put on what some called the "shit face," the look of content arrogance that makes those around you wish they *were* you. It was time The Blue Stars got the recognition they deserved. I demanded it with my gaze.

As we neared the tunnel, I relaxed, and my nerves took over. It hurt to walk. I had injured my knee earlier that morning practicing an illusion. A loud pop accompanied a burning sensation that registered in my brain as a very bad thing. I didn't want to be sent to the sidelines like Stephanie, so I put on a happy face and

mentioned it to no one. Though I was nervous, I was looking forward to this show more than others. We had several new changes to unveil, the crowd was rumored to have record numbers, and we'd get to leave the south tomorrow. There wasn't much that could mess this up.

I hit Sean in *Part 1*. This had only happened once before. Late in rehearsal before the Kalamazoo show, we had just turned front field. Flying past each other at 192 beats per minute, our paths had never intersected. A sharp blow to the head from his contra changed that. Sean did a 360. I was knocked out of the form, not knowing what had just happened. At the end of the rep, I was surrounded by every visual tech on the field. Matt Carfagna got to me first.

"Dude, you okay?"

"I... I think?"

"Can you see me?"

"Yeah..." I tried to play it off like nothing but hesitated. "Can I sit out for a bit?"

"Do you think you can still march?"

"Probably."

"Alright. Stay in, then. Okay?" I nodded. I would be fine. As the season went on, it became a "remember when" story. Now it was in front of 16,000 people. The blow was not as painful as it had been in Michigan. I had the advantage of a shako to cushion the impact, but I popped out of the drill. A split second is all it takes to stick out. I worried that the entire stadium was now watching me. I struggled to regain my composure, unable to shake the feeling that I was now on display. For all I knew,

the jumbotron zoomed in on me with a banner reading *Watch the idiot that just ran into the tuba.*

I wasn't the only person who struggled. There were several falls. Christina had managed to get up from hers just as a line of baritones came barreling toward her. The work we had done all week hadn't seemed to pay off. We headed back to Ohio – still a 12th place drum corps, our recovery of 11th slipping from our grasp.

Chapter 9: Allentown

Allentown, Pennsylvania. J. Birney Crum Stadium. Noted as one of the most historic performance venues in drum corps, JBC was a bowl that would eat you alive, or so I was told, home to old Cadets fans who sat on their hands for anybody else. Allentown was our focus for the week. Our last chance to see how we stacked up to other corps before Finals, everybody felt the urgency in our rehearsals. We started the week 460 miles away in Dublin, Ohio, but our eyes were fixed on Saturday night's stadium lights.

"There's a late baritone over here every time." Ryan's face was scrunched, frustrated. "Whoever it is, you're the only person not together. Listen. Open up your ears, and play with what's around you." We were in deep cleaning mode. The final rhythmic statement of *Part 2* had been a mess all season. Rushing, dragging, everything in between. We had finally gotten a sense of vertical alignment, but one baritone ruined that clarity every rep. Ryan motioned for the staff to go in search of the rogue musician. We played the chunk time and time again, the staff slowly passing our bells each rep. They hovered near the leads. Their nods confirmed the guilty party. Ryan stepped toward the baritones, listening. There was nowhere to hide. It didn't matter. Mike had no intentions of hiding.

"Mike. You're late. Fix it."

"Everybody else is early."

"Well whatever it is, you sound wrong."

"I'm right."

"Excuse me?" Ryan looked stupefied, unable to believe that a member was challenging him.

"It's rushing. Nobody is playing with Mark's hands right now except for me. I promise you, I'm right." He began to demonstrate the error. Ryan cut him off.

"I don't care. Right now you are the *only* person playing it like that. The judges aren't going to care that you're right. All they're going to hear is one baritone playing later than the rest of the hornline. You have to adjust."

"How am I supposed to adjust to something that's inconsistent? There's no guarantee we'll play it like this again. I need to..."

"Go run." Ryan's face was unburned, but bright red. Mike stared back, expressionless.

"No."

"What?"

"I'm not going to be punished for doing what's written." Ryan exploded.

"Put your horn down and go run! Get out of here if you can't cooperate."

"Fine." Mike eyed the circle. "If anybody wants to be right, come run with me." He had been testing the waters of rebellion for the last minute and had just taken the plunge headfirst. No sooner had a shouting match begun than it ended.

"Hey, woah, woah..... you're not an asshole. Everybody, why don't we take five? Let's bring it in for a bit." Russ had appeared out of nowhere. He could have appeared for all knew, but he was in the right place at the right time doing exactly what Russ did best – absorb conflicts and wring out solutions. At the rate we were going, JBC wouldn't be able to eat us alive. We would do that ourselves.

I looked out over the streets of Allentown. The rehearsal field across from Trexler Middle School was perched atop a hill, fenced in for the safety of young students with either poor judgment or depth perception. The view was simple but breathtaking. If I looked long enough, focusing on nothing in particular, the fence disappeared. The void between near and far blurred into one. The far away streets started where the grass left off. I was weightless, suspended in the infinite. Another field with no lights, ensemble was a race against time. As the sun set, I could see JBC in the distance, a bright dot on the expansive horizon. If I listened closely, I could just make out the impacts of the corps performing. It was an odd feeling. I could sense their performances in the distance – I could see their venue, but they were unaware of me. I felt like a spectator.

“Let’s run that again. Start with *Hey, Sailor*.” Erik reviewed new choreography we had gotten that morning. The entire visual block was spent deconstructing the scatter that got us into the ballad, building the resulting form part by part, layering in choreography – anything that could boost our GE and visual interest. Another Shapiro addition, we had just one day to perfect it for competition. We used vocals to keep time with the actions, each phrase corresponding to a particular action.

“From the top.”

Hey, Sailor. Look up there! Here’s a pie. Boob, forced arch. Bend down, bring it around, lighthouse. Jel – ly – fish.

“Again.” The sun had set. I could see nothing but the lights on the horizon. Over at JBC, I thought I heard Crown. *Hey, Sailor. Look up there!....*

“Hey, we’re waking up early to go to Dunkin’ Donuts tomorrow. You want in?” A group of us walked back to the school from McDonald’s. It sat across from a Dunkin’ and a Rite Aid. At this point in the season, any small store or fast food place felt like a resort. I could buy things. I made decisions about what I wanted. I relaxed. I thought about the painful fatigue I felt every morning, sneaking an extra five or ten minutes of sleep after wakeup. Did I want to lose that? I loved donuts, but at what cost? I thought it over, sipping my frappe.

“I’m good, thanks though.” We approached the school, heading for the cafeteria. It was corps history night. The tables were already filling as members trickled in, bringing with them their own bags of fast food or bus box snacks. We never seemed to stop eating. At the center of it all stood Russ, Brad, and the drum majors. It was Russ who spoke first.

“We are fortunate enough to be part of an organization with a rich history in this activity that does far greater things than any of us could as individuals. We are approaching our fiftieth year, and for those of you who don’t know, that is a big deal considering what we’ve faced in the past.” There was something about the way Russ spoke that captured the attention of all in the room. We clung to his words like life itself.

“We began as The First Federal Blue Stars, generously supported by the First Federal Savings and Loan in La Crosse. Education has always been at the forefront of our mission. The founders, Frank Van Voorhis, Dave Dummer, and David Kampschroer, all believed in more than competition, but they also believed in

excellence. If people were keeping score, The Blue Stars would be aiming for the highest one.

“The corps had tremendous success early on. We were one of the founding members of Drum Corps International, and as most of you know, we came in second at the first ever DCI Finals in 1972. The success of the corps continued until financial difficulties rose in the early ‘80s. After the ‘82 season, the board met to discuss whether it was time to let go of The Blue Stars. They were prepared to fold the corps, but they didn’t. Why? Because of those of you sitting in this room. They had no idea what the future of this organization would look like, but they knew that the kids involved in this organization were too important to abandon.

“Instead, they scaled back. They formed the Blue Star Cadets, in many ways starting over. They recruited as many kids from La Crosse as they could get. In fact, your very own Brad Furlano started as drum major. Brad, you wanna’ tell them about that?”

“Well I started out on drums, but I was too small to carry it with the harness, and they said I looked cute on the podium.” He chuckled, relaxing for the first time I had seen.

“How to become drum major, ladies and gentlemen.” Russ continued. “But it was *that* group that stuck around, that grew the organization. In 1989, the corps won the A60 World Championship. If it weren’t for their dedication, there would have been no corps for me to join. I started marching baritone here in ‘93, the same year we won the Division III title. The corps continued to be successful, winning the Div. III title in ‘01 and ‘03. In 2006, the corps registered as a Division I drum corps

for the first time since 1982. In 2008, we returned to DCI Finals and ended up finishing 8th, and here we are today. I couldn't be prouder of what this organization has accomplished. You are continuing an important legacy down a road paved with the sacrifices of those who came before you – members and staff who refused to believe that this corps would be anything but phenomenal." The cafeteria was silent as we pondered his words.

"The corps necklace..." Mark took over. "We didn't have a corps necklace for quite some time. When I was a rookie, the necklace wasn't as big a deal as it is now. You paid the drum major five bucks and he got you a string and a bead. I had mine for a week before the bead cracked in half. We take much more pride in these now." He held up a coin. "You'll notice that regardless of how many beads we have, every necklace has this coin. It's a British West-African one tenth of a penny. On it is the Star of David. The corps claims no affiliation with the religion, but we played a collection of Jewish songs back in the 70's for several shows – that's where the corps song comes from. It reminds us of that heritage." He had cut his necklace off, reconstructing his new one as he spoke. "The first bead you'll get is the rookie bead – the white one. It goes to the right of the coin, and the star faces the bead." I watched as he carefully threaded the parts onto the wire of his new necklace.

"Next, for each additional year you march, you get a blue bead. These go on the other side of the coin." A series of blue beads slid down to meet the rest of the necklace, a physical symbol of *The Factory*, *Houdini*, and *ReBourne*. "Finally, when you age out, you get your red bead. The original uniforms were blue with white straps and red plumes, so that's how we get the colors. The red bead goes on the far

left side of everything so that when you wear it," he reached back, tightening the clasp, "the ageout year is closest to your heart." Five beads hung with pride around Mark's neck. He had given over a year of his life to this organization. Tonight would symbolize my three months of dedicated servitude.

"Before we begin, I want every rookie to pair up with a vet. Vets, talk about what the corps necklace means to you. How do you wear it? Why do you wear it? What did you learn while earning it?" I somehow ended up at a table with Foth. As he began talking, I realized that I had been unfair to him. Just as I assumed he held a grudge against me, I let a conflict from two years ago affect my perceptions of a vet – an ageout in his third year who had been through more than I could imagine. I was not the same person I was two years ago. Neither was he.

"To me, this is about the experience. Scores are great and all, but what you really take away from drum corps are friendships and skills. When I wear this necklace, I'm reminding myself of what I've gone through. It was hard, but I pushed harder than my obstacles and came out on top. I see other people wearing these beads, and I can relate to them. They might have marched different years, but they fought for the same corps. I have an immediate bond with people I've never met because we share these experiences. That's what's contained in this necklace for me, and I take pride in that."

Mark came to our table with supplies. I grabbed a coin and a bead. I eyed the coin, turning it over in my fingers. It was tarnished and slimy. I scrubbed it off with condensation from my drink. 1942. The coin predated even The Blue Stars. I set my bead gently on top of the hole in the coin as I worked, carefully measuring the length

of the wire I wanted. I slipped on the bead and coin, holding the ends so I wouldn't lose the precious cargo. The line for the crimper stretched around the cafeteria. As I waited, I gripped the ends tighter, watching my peers screw the clasp of their new accessory shut, sliding the contents to the right location.

I reached the table where Zack and Mark worked to complete the necklaces. He slid on an end screw, gave a tight squeeze with the crimper, and sent me on my way. I pulled the ends around my neck, connecting them securely with one another. The new weight against my neck was foreign and uncomfortable. I played with the parts.

"Ekstrom, let me see!" Ben Owens, an ageout, stopped, turning me to look. I put my hands at my sides, fighting the urge to fidget. "Looks good, man! Congrats!" I spent the next several minutes staring at my reflection in my phone camera. Hanging from my neck was a symbol of hard work that few would ever obtain. Wearing this would forever identify me as a Blue Star. I slipped into sleep that evening, the feeling of the necklace growing more natural, becoming part of who I was.

I was going to pee my pants. Even worse, we were already in uniform. The stadium at JBC was bigger than I had expected. The stands were packed, a sea of faces engrossed in the performance on the field. As they watched the corps before us, all I could think about was exploding. Several Blue Stars had left the twos to sneak over to a nearby bathroom. It was my only hope. I heard Dan groaning behind me.

"Hey, you gotta' go to the bathroom?"

"Oh my gosh, yes." His eyes were wide.

"I'll be your two. Let's go." We sped up the near-vertical hill. I wasn't sure how the front ensemble got their stuff up here, but I was glad I didn't have that responsibility. The door was in sight. My bladder relaxed, anticipating the freedom I would soon give it. *Not so fast, man. We aren't there yet. We still gotta' get this uniform off. Chill. Soon.* My foot crossed the threshold.

"Blue Stars! Hey! No. We don't do that. Get back here." Russ was running after the most recent wave of members to attempt a sneaky leak. "Get back in your twos. Hurry." I groaned at the irony. Russ was always in the right place at the right time, but at the moment, it was the wrong place at the worst possible time. I was going to die. I could feel it.

Maybe I could just pee myself right now – get it over with. Nobody would notice, right? How dark do you think this grey would get? Who's going to notice one darker grey spot out of 80? We were set up for the show. I decided to hold it. Maybe I'd lose control of my bladder during the illusion in *Part 5*. That's the only way *Part 5* could get any more miserable. Zack's hands gave the start. I went into performance mode. I didn't have time to think about personal problems. The only thing my brain could process were the instructions I would need for a successful performance. *Turn, turn, lock – up, up, lock.*

Allentown cheered. A lot. I was told to prepare for silence because we weren't The Cadets, but the audience responded better than any crowd since Bentonville. Fueled by the energy they gave back to us, performing was fun again.

Before I knew it, the show was over. I ripped my horn down. The audience stood. From what I had heard, standing ovations were rare in this town. I smiled. Somewhere in that crowd was my aunt Lori, my mother's sister. What a great show for her to watch. I couldn't wait to greet her at the busses, but first – holy God, I had to pee.

We were in an unusually happy mood for having the second-longest bus ride of the season. Allentown had been good to us, and we carried that momentum into Pittsburgh. We beat Spirit. After the show, their frustration was evident. We celebrated our small victory. Dan Heath puffed casually on a cigar.

“In 2009, I got one of these during the season, and I told everybody that I was going to smoke it after we beat Phantom Regiment. They said I was crazy. Nothing felt better than smoking that on Finals night, knowing what we had accomplished.” He blew smoke, smiling. I had to admit it felt good. After the stress we'd been under the last week – the arguments, the reps where even our best wasn't good enough, the reminders that our season would soon be over – it was nice to see something come from our hard work.

Now on our way back to Indiana, we enjoyed the last long bus ride we'd share together. We had several more rehearsal days ahead of us, continuing our climb up the competitive ladder rung by rung. For now, we looked back. Riding through the darkness, passing quiet, sleepy towns, we were alive and well. I was going to miss these people. I was going to miss this life.

Chapter 10: Finals

The sun was up when we pulled in to Frankfort High School. Do not confuse that with the sun was rising. The entire town was bathing in the light of a sun that had taken ownership of the sky. I watched cars getting filled at the gas station across the street, their owners well into the start of their days. My eyes were heavy. I pulled hard against the resistance to force them open. As I sat motionless, I felt as though I were made of lead. I pressed myself deeper into the seat. Normally the cushions did little to comfort me, but at this very moment, it was as though I were drifting freely in a hammock. The microphone clicked on. I shut my eyes, bracing for the impact of Mark's voice.

"Okay, guys, listen up. It's about... nine o'clock right now. We're gonna' get a few hours of floor time, so move quickly. You'll go through the doors just outside the busses. The gym will be on your right. Guys on the far side, girls on the close side. Ready, go." I trudged along to my spot. I always aimed to set up camp just outside the lane, lined up with the hoop. There was something about the lines on the court that anchored me amidst a sea of chaos. I threw my things down and collapsed onto my mattress. The warm glow of the sun crept in through windows along the top of the gym, lulling me to sleep.

When I woke, it was just past eleven. We had an afternoon of rehearsal left, knowing that everything we did here would directly affect our Finals performance. The pressure was on. I stumbled out of the gym in search of a bathroom. What I found instead was a group of high school athletes waiting for yearbook photos. A volleyball player caught my eye. Her name was Emily. I had met her a few years ago

at solo/ensemble contest. We met up at the mall a few weeks later to hang out, but had since lost contact. Who'd have guessed that I'd come stumbling out of her gym in pajamas two years later? What even is drum corps?

The staff was holding nothing back today. It was time to decide how clean we were going to be. Brass staff started cutting people from parts and watering down others. Matt Carfagna kept the section after visual rehearsal for what he called "baritone boot camp." He had used this system earlier in the season with mixed results. It was nothing more than an extra fifteen minutes of rehearsal for the section. We had cleaned marching basics, posture, and drill, but it had never been routine enough to make us not hate losing more of our breaks. Dave had already stolen fifteen minutes from our mornings. We didn't want to lose more from our afternoons.

"Alright, guys. Our horn snaps kinda suck, yeah?" Matt was not one for sugar coating things. "Circle it up, and let's start looking less like babies and more like baritones." We snapped up and down every four counts. Fatigue was setting in. My forearms burned. I was getting slower.

"Guys, think of it like this. Horn snaps are supposed to be one count, yes? Well when I marched, we always thought of them as zero count horn moves. They're down, then they're up. There's no in between. Motion both starts and ends on the same count. If you blinked, you'd miss it. It'd be like magic. That's what you're going for. That's what makes an intimidating section." We continued our boot camp in rhythm. *1-2-3-crush-up-2-3-crush-down-2-3-crush-up...*

The football team filed into the stands for their photo. I could hear them jeering amongst themselves.

“Win State! Win State!” Alan added vocals to the exercise. We laughed, but we let his humor motivate us. *1-2-3-Win-State-2-3-Win-State-2-3...*

The fire hose finally reached the bari/euphs. At the end of the opener, we had eighth-note slurs and staccatos between partials. It had been a struggle to clean all season, especially for me. My flexibility was still limited, and it was a gamble each time the part came up in a show situation. It didn’t help that I was jazz running. The eighth notes alternated between chord tones, so Ryan split the part between players. I was given more donuts to play. He reassured us that the clarity we’d get by changing the part would outweigh the loss in content. There wasn’t much of the original opener left. All my favorite parts had been cut, some as early as Sparta. I was losing the content that motivated me through the monotony. I had to trust the staff. They had more training than me.

I finished dinner quickly and tried to relax. I lay on my mattress, stuffing my face with Oreos. My aunt Lori had given me three packages in Allentown. One of them didn’t survive the trip back to Indiana, and the second would soon be gone. It didn’t matter. I could eat whatever I wanted. No matter how much food I consumed, I was still losing weight. I’d soon be emaciated. If Oreos could prolong my existence, so much the better. I finished another row, then stood, making my slow return to the field for ensemble.

My mom watched me from the stands. She had arrived that afternoon to volunteer for a few days. I felt exposed. My anonymity within the ensemble was gone. She tracked me around the field, learning my every move. I missed an assignment, going on after I should have stopped. I dropped to the ground for the pushups I knew I deserved while she watched from the stands. I wondered if I would have made the same error had she not been there. I couldn't wonder for long, or I'd miss more instructions. I wished she would leave.

It was an interesting feeling. When we were in Merrillville, all I had wanted was for friends and family to see me marching. Something changed. Any contact from the real world annoyed me. It reminded me of reality. That reality confirmed the impermanence of the life I now lived. Reality would soon come to destroy the world I had grown to love. As hard as it was, drum corps was surprisingly easy. If you focused on your job and did everything asked of you, there was nothing left to worry about. The world didn't matter. School didn't matter. Grades were not a concern. There was no unknown, because every choice was made for you. I had forgotten that this was a fantasy, an ideal scenario that disappeared at the end of the summer save my memories and a twelve-minute show on a DVD. It was impossible to return to that fantasy with a piece of my reality watching from the stands.

I had woken up to pee – nothing unusual. It was just the result of staying hydrated. On my way back from the bathroom, I was alone with my thoughts, surveying the quiet halls. This was all about to come to an end. In just a few days, I would be home, preparing my return to Ball State. My new family, now quietly

dozing in the gym, would be miles away. Some of them I would never see again. We had come so far together. Spring training felt like years ago. It was difficult to think that it was the starting point of the same timeline I was on now, and as we neared its final event, every moment left with these people was sacred. My footsteps echoed in the empty corridor.

The air ducts in the gym boomed as the metal expanded. Filling the halls, I had never heard a duct system so noisy. I wondered why it hadn't woken me up before. There was shouting from the gym. The doors on the men's sleeping area were open, and the battery was running outside. Mark cut in front of me, chasing after the drumline.

"Hey! Get back inside. Get in here *now!*" He sounded like an angry parent disciplining a child. I stayed out of his way. The drama and commotion continued to draw more attention to the far door. Outside, there was more shouting. I had no idea what was going on. Perhaps I was hallucinating, the product of three months of fatigue. As Mark corralled the battery back indoors, I heard an interesting array of words thrown around. *Bomb. Eggs. Police.*

Evidently several members of the football team were less than excited to have a group of strange band nerds take over their home facilities. Never mind that at this point, the majority of the corps was strong, fit adult men and toned, tan, half-naked women. They didn't like us. They didn't understand us. They didn't want us. A small group had snuck back to the school in the middle of the night, set off small explosives by the exterior doors, and attempted to egg the members who rushed out

to investigate. Of the nineteen individuals who ran outside to explore, not one egg hit a human target. We had been attacked by some truly remarkable athletes.

The wind was picking up. The final Pink Wednesday of the season was just one run through away from ending. Last night's run had been my best yet, and I was looking forward to an even better one. I could count the remaining runs of the show on one hand. Including tonight, we would perform *The Blue World* just four more times. After that, it would be gone forever. We had survived three long days of rehearsal – the last rehearsal days of the summer. The show was noticeably better, and I felt stronger. We were ready to charge into Lucas Oil and prove that beating Spirit in Pittsburgh was no mistake, but we would first need to beat the wall of lightning heading our way. Brilliant streaks and flashes shot across the sky above the school. Beneath the clouds, peeking through the black, were the last golden tones of the sunset. As the clouds choked out the last rays of light, the run was called. The pit scrambled to cover their equipment and shelter it from danger. I grabbed my gear and took off for the safety of the gym. Heavy drops of cold rain whizzed past my face. Several struck me, their intensity building. There was something about Indiana and rain this summer. I stood by the far door, watching the storm blow in.

Having cancelled our performance, it performed for us instead. The steady fall of rain droned on, ringing against the ground and the roof. Sometimes lightning tore across the sky, followed by a splitting, crackling thunder. Other times, I'd catch flashes in my peripherals, looking just in time to miss them. Quiet, delayed rumbles

were the only confirmation that what I had seen really existed. I stood in awe of the beauty – independent, unchoreographed. I wondered if nature watched us perform with the same intrigue. The rain slowed, now a gentle pitter-patter. It was time to go out. I grabbed my wallet.

I found it interesting that what seemed to be the most important week had the least enforced sleep schedule. People wandered around well into the evening. Conversations echoed through the gym. Members made late-night trips to the Village Pantry. I was on my way to McDonalds. A ten-minute walk, it gave me a chance to be alone with my thoughts.

The town was sleepy. I walked along the main stretch. I knew it well. Part of my route to Ball State, it was always bustling and crowded. Tonight it was desolate. I glanced over my shoulders. This was how people got kidnapped, but the idea of a mocha frappe was worth the risk. It also got me away from the monotony of food truck meals. I had stolen away to McDonalds each night. Few Blue Stars ventured that far, opting for the Burger King or Taco Bell across from the school.

I took a seat across from the TV. The Olympics had been the main focus of the media. I watched as world's top athletes competed to bring recognition and prestige to their country. We had a lot in common. They were on a completely different level, but the premise was the same. We were the best at our activity. We sacrificed a life of ease to perfect our craft. Each group sought to bring recognition and prestige to their corps. I sympathized with them. The product of their training was soon coming to an end as well.

The labyrinth within Lucas Oil Stadium swallowed me. The last time I travelled these halls, I promised myself that I would march drum corps. The promise seemed to be paying off. Staged in the tunnel, I peered into the stands, realizing just how few people attended DCI Prelims. It didn't matter. I was about to perform in Lucas Oil Stadium as a member of a drum corps for the first time. Taking the field, I gazed at the expanse above. My shoes brushed lightly across the turf. The largest stage of the DCI tour was set. All we had left to do was display the work we had done over the last three days.

"Have a great show, Blue Stars."

You know those dreams where you're running from something and you keep tripping? Or you're chasing something, but no matter how fast you run, you never get any closer? That's what my Prelims performance felt like. It wasn't *bad* per se, but it didn't feel right. My actions felt forced and unnatural. Everything stayed together, but there was enough friction to make for a very uncomfortable eleven minutes. If you've marched drum corps, you have likely had at least one show like this. If you haven't marched drum corps, I hope you never have to experience this. Leaving the field, I had no idea what had happened. I didn't know what to think. I had had enough terrible shows called great performances by the staff to know that my instincts couldn't be trusted. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that we had somehow repeated Olathe, Kansas.

"What do you guys think of that performance?" Ryan's voice was calm and thoughtful. *Meh...* and *Ehh...* were the responses returned to him. "Yeah, I agree. It was just a show. Nothing terrible. Nothing spectacular. It sounded like you guys

might have been afraid to open up in there, but now it's not new anymore.

Tomorrow we come back and really show them your training, yeah?"

Another storm swept across the center of the state, heading straight for us. We had no intentions of sticking around after the performance, but we rushed to leave early. Rain pelted the windows as we traveled back to Frankfort. It was still falling steadily when we got to the school. Most of the restaurants were closed. With business slow and a storm on its way, they had chosen to close early, forgetting that a herd of young adults would soon be searching for something to do instead of sleep. I could always count on the Village Pantry to be open, and I made my way through the rain.

I took a seat, accompanied by donuts, chocolate milk, and my thoughts. We wanted to come out swinging, but our punch found nothing but air. Spirit was back on top of us, but even worse, Crossmen were dangerously close. They had been climbing all season. With Glassmen out of their way, we were the only corps standing between them and a Finals appearance. My mind was back in Texas. "Do you guys know what happens on Saturday for the corps who don't make Finals? They march in a parade."

"You know, guys, I've been around this activity a long time, and sometimes things just aren't fair," is the last thing you want to hear Tom Aungst tell you on Semifinals day. Things had been clicking during rehearsal. Field lining had even taken the time to paint all the different hashes and numbers we'd see on the field so

that nothing caught us by surprise, but Tom's end-of-rehearsal speech left me feeling uneasy, and I couldn't shake the sensation. It followed me to Indy.

We stepped off the bus at Military Park and followed the staff as they took us to the far side of the park for warmup. Passing other corps, I was envious of their closure. They knew that this would be their last performance. As much as that sucked, at least they knew. Their performance could have a sense of finality. We either had a show tomorrow or it was over tonight. The bubble was thin.

"If you knew that this was your last show, how would you perform it differently?" Megan had always been a source of cheer and positivity. This was the most serious I could remember her being. I thought about her question. The staff had always told us that a show was no different than rehearsal. If you try to do things differently in a show – give more energy, play louder, hit your dots with greater precision – then rehearsal is a waste. Performances are about consistency, not exceptionality. Still, I knew that I could do more. If I had nothing left, why not give it all? Why hadn't I taken that approach all season? Because it was hard? Because I was new? Because I had always been counting on one more performance? Those were questions I could no longer answer. We were preparing for what might be our last show. The only thing I could do now was perform as though it were.

Lizzie and I stayed behind with Mike Halron as he anxiously checked his phone for updates on our performance from within.

"You know, it's gonna' be close," he stated, checking once more for news, pocketing his phone when it failed to contain the desired information. Nearby,

Crossmen were huddled together, searching for the answer to the same question. I stood, looking up at Lucas Oil Stadium as it engulfed my field of vision. Inside that building was everything I had ever wanted. I thought back to Minneapolis and how for a few fleeting moments I had wanted to quit. I thought back to Forest City when this all first came together – how hard it had been in the beginning. I wasn't sure how long I would make it, or if I could survive spring training at all. I thought back to a year ago, sitting in the stands for DCI Finals, promising myself I would march – and the hours I put in to learn a new instrument. This corps had become my home and family. I couldn't fathom that it might be ending.

Mike checked again. No news. It was difficult to stay still. Anxiety rushed over me, leaving me powerless to stop from pacing. We waited there, silently acknowledging the shared fear. Time stretched on in ways I had never experienced, each moment bringing us no closer to an answer. We hung there in limbo, victims of each passing second.

Cheers erupted from the Crossmen, the silence shattered by a sudden hysteria. Members grabbed at each other, embracing, tears and laughter filling their faces with streams of jubilation. My heart stopped. Endorphins flooded my system, ending the adrenaline-induced anxiety. My body prepared for an emotional crash. I felt nothing.

"That's not good." Lizzie headed towards our buses. All the while, the Crossmen continued their celebrations – jumping, shouting, hugging, screaming. I could not escape them.

As we approached, Travis met us, his face empty. He looked at us, shaking his head. Our season was over. They had won. His face filled with tears as I passed and stepped onto the bus. There was a lifeless silence. What was normally an energized home for over 50 members – a place to shout and tell inappropriate jokes, a place where you could vent about the days' frustrations or belt out hype music at the top of your lungs now acted like a black hole, sucking in everything. The only sounds that escaped were the sobs of a corps whose final performance of the season had just been taken from them. Walking the aisle into the mourning, I noticed that I was not crying. I was sad. I knew I should be crying, but my body had yet to break me down. I became uncomfortable, self-conscious of my dry cheeks. We had done everything together, and I couldn't even cry with my brothers and sisters.

Reaching my seat, I sat down, studying the colorful pattern of the upholstery on in front of me. I looked around at the filthy floor – our home. I reached back, grabbing my zipper to release myself from the jacket. As I pulled, I realized I would never again wear this uniform in competition. I would never again perform *The Blue World*. My face became streaked and contorted. My breathing was shallow and fast, my body attempting to take in air between horrendous sobs. I had never felt this much pain. I never thought my season might end on Semifinals night, yet that was the reality I was living. My jacket not fully off, I held my face in my hands and deteriorated. A firm hand rested on my back. I looked over to see Nacho's arm extended towards me. In November, Sean had been the member who reached out to me, motivated me, and made me feel at home. It seemed fitting that he was the one

setting aside his own emotional struggles to give me strength as I continued to break down.

It took quite some time to get out of my uniform. I didn't want to take it off. I finally placed it on the hanger, ensuring that everything looked perfect. Making my way off the bus, I pushed past those still mourning. Many of them were ageouts. My heart continued to break, but this time for them. I had another season and a chance at redemption. Their story was over. Many of them were *Houdini* rookies. They had experienced the best season since the corps' return to World Class. They had fought a season-long battle in 2011 before taking their place in Finals. What they were experiencing was new, unknown, and unwanted. I left them to their emotions. Stepping off the bus, I was met by Mark, still in uniform. He stepped towards me, and we embraced.

"Thank you for being a great leader." I barely choked it out amidst tears.

"Thank you for being a great rookie." Mark had risen with the corps since 2008. His third year of leading the corps from the podium, I didn't want to know what he was feeling.

Back in the lot, celebrations continued from other corps. I stood there, not knowing what came next. As members regained their composure and left the buses, we followed the only routine we knew. After shows came food, so we walked to the truck. None of us wanted to talk about what had just happened, but no other conversation seemed genuine. Behind every happy story was the quiet understanding that we were all miserable. At the food truck, the volunteers had gotten word of the results. Their feigned enthusiasm did little to reverse the

emotional devastation that we had just endured. Loading my boat with too much food, I sat down in the gravel and ate my feelings until they were completely extinguished.

There was no reason to wake up. The only thing on our schedule was the pity parade, and I needed to pencil in extra time to sulk. The night had been rough, and I had binge eaten the rest of my Oreos. Other members came and went through the gym all night. Nobody wanted to settle down. When it was time to get up the next morning, the prevailing question was “what for?” I mustered up enough energy to go eat some cereal, the only food for today’s EPL.

Everything at this point was damage control, protecting our integrity. We had taken a heavy blow, and it knocked us to the ground. Staying down would only confirm that we belonged there. Pulling ourselves back up and handling the parade with pride would make a case for the worth of our organization. We needed to show that we were better than 13th, and that started by embracing our new agenda. We were marching in the parade.

Warmups had never felt so relaxed. Circled in a parking lot in downtown Indy, we went through the usual motions. Across the street, Glassmen performed chunks of their show. My focus was scattered. This was a parade, and parades were boring. There was only one thing left that needed to be serious.

“Ageouts, come to the center. Everybody else, fill in the holes.” There was an uncomfortable silence. A Finals day tradition, Ryan had given the ageouts the choice to do this yesterday. They refused. To agree would have meant anticipating defeat.

With no other options, it was time to give them their moment in the circle. Some were already crying. Others seemed desensitized, staring blankly at the ground. We began with the ballad.

It is almost impossible to play while crying. I would never play this music with this hornline again, but I had to play it one last time for a group of sobbing ageouts, the members who had set the standard for what it meant to be a member of this organization. I saw my role models fall apart before my eyes. Mark battled his emotions as he conducted us, winning in his arms but losing in his face. It tore me to pieces. I was shaking with hysteria. This was supposed to be an opportunity for celebration. Instead, it was another time for mourning.

“Jewish Chorale.” Mark called out our corps song. Each note was painful. This was the end, but where was our crown? When it was over, we took some time to regain our composure. The only exception was Zack Crissman. He stood on the opposite side of the circle, unmoving, expressionless. He was ready for orders. I wasn’t always sure he was human.

As the parade block approached the viewing stand, the announcer introduced the corps.

“And here we have the Blue Stars from La Crosse, Wisconsin. One of the top groups, they’ve been consistent finalists recently, and were just tenths of a point away from a Finals performance tonight. You really gotta’ hand it to these kids. They work extremely hard. I can’t imagine being that close.” Each word dug deeper into the wound. We turned to face the crowd as Mark conducted the last chunk of *The Blue World* The Blue Stars would ever perform.

"I want to see each and every one of you back next year." Dan Heath addressed the bari/euphs outside the equipment truck. Other sections checked in instruments and uniforms, but he wanted to have a word with us. "Think of how much you learned this summer. Don't make us start from nothing again. If you can come back and I see that you went somewhere else, you're dead to me. I'll delete you from Facebook, and we won't be friends anymore. Seriously, come back." I already knew I'd be back. When I promised myself I'd march drum corps, I never planned to settle for 13th. I dreamed of standing on the field for retreat. I could do that without leaving. This was the corps that had produced *Houdini*. I wanted to make Blue Stars history. At the very least, I wanted to leave the corps in better shape than I found it, and that didn't mean abandoning it after one season. I was in this for the long haul.

I found myself once more in the back seat of the family car, this time on the northbound side of I-65. It was weird to be in real clothes. Going home felt more like leaving home. For the first time in 85 days, I was separated from the corps. I had no schedule. My decisions were my own. I was free but lonely. My mom bombarded me with questions about the season, and the stories flowed with ease. I played with my coin as I spoke. Storytelling was therapeutic. It put me back in the moment, if only in my mind. My corps family surrounded me once more as we suffered and triumphed together.

The Forest City windmill run. Maxing out the Dr. Beat in Sparta. The heat of Merrillville, Whitewater, and Denton. Bus conversations. Fuel stop shenanigans. Our shower songs. Bus hype. Jewish Chorale. The roar of the crowd after a great show.

The tears and anger of Friday night. Most of the summer I wouldn't tell her about, and the things we chose to discuss meant nothing to her. I spoke and she listened, but there was no way for her to *really* understand without being there. With each passing moment, the miles between my corps and me grew. Spinning my coin, I drifted off to sleep, counting down the days until November brought me back.

Research Analysis

Drum Corps International, self-described as “Marching Music’s Major League,” is widely considered to provide young people with the highest level of music competition within the marching arts. Each summer, approximately 3500 student-musicians up to twenty-two years of age perform live for nearly 400,000 fans in some of the greatest sporting venues in the country (Drum Corps International, 2015). Year after year, members return to the activity and their respective corps families, stopping only when they age out. The experience is said to help corps members grow as musicians, athletes, people, and leaders. I joined the Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps as an enthusiastic saxophone player with just three months experience playing the baritone. By the time I aged out, I had served as a small group leader, the baritone/euphonium section leader, and was the model for the euphonium section, used for tuning and other musical demonstrations.

Despite the tremendous growth I experienced, drum corps is often perceived negatively among classically trained musicians and music educators. For example, a graduate assistant and trumpet performance major once negated my opinion on the subject of music pedagogy, identifying me as “just a drum corps guy.” Anecdotally, I often hear of performers returning to their high school marching bands, thrilled by what they have accomplished during their summer with drum corps, only to be told by their directors or private teachers that they are, in some ways, worse than before they marched. Many teachers even discourage their students from participating in the activity. These negative perceptions seem to follow corps members, but they are not indicative of what I experienced while marching with the Blue Stars. Based on the experience that I wrote about and the additional two summers that I marched, I feel that many of these perceptions

are unfair and not representative of the average experience in the activity. The purpose of this study, then, was to determine the perceptions of participants regarding their musical growth and the benefits of drum corps experiences. Survey results were used to test the hypothesis that drum corps is a positive experience for student musicians with quality educational outcomes. Specific questions that drove this inquiry included:

1. What are participants' perceptions of their musical growth as a result of drum corps participation?
2. Which participants, if any, had more positive perceptions of their musical growth as a result of drum corps participation?
3. Is drum corps a positive experience with quality educational outcomes?

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

To answer the stated questions, the researcher created an online survey and distributed it to a convenience sample of those who participated in drum corps between 2012 and 2014. All of the participants (N = 74) were from the same organization, the Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, and were asked to evaluate their perceptions of musical growth resulting from their participation in the drum corps activity. Perceptions were measured with a Likert scale. Participants responded to twenty-four items, scaled from 1 to 6 (Very Strongly Disagree – Very Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating a more positive perception of one's musical growth as a result of marching with a drum and bugle corps. Some items were negatively phrased and randomly presented within the questionnaire to minimize the potential for response sets among participants. Negatively

phrased items were reversed scored to prevent any distortion of one's perception score. The questionnaire used for data collection is included as an appendix to this document.

In addition to the twenty-four Likert items, the questionnaire also contained a number of open-ended prompts. Respondents were asked to elaborate on any additional positive or negative aspects of marching with a drum corps that was not addressed in the Likert items. Likewise, the respondents were asked to identify who had commented on their drum corps participation and to report the nature of these comments as either positive or negative. Finally, the participants responded to several demographic questions so that the researcher might better understand the differences in perceptions among the respondents. Demographic items included the number of years marched, one's current or anticipated major in college, and the size, quality, and competitiveness of the participants' high school marching program.

RESULTS

The mean perception score among the participants ($N = 74$) was $M = 121.8$ with a standard deviation of $SD = 18.8$, indicating that the average participant had a positive perception of his or her musical growth as a result of marching with a drum and bugle corps. The lowest recorded score was 68 and the highest recorded score was 144. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated at least a somewhat positive musical experience as a result of marching drum corps. The remaining 4%, while not positive, were only somewhat negative in their perceptions of musical growth. The number of participants in each classification category is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Perception Score Classification Categories

Description	Score Range	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Very Positive Perception	125 - 144	45	61%	100%
Positive Perception	105 - 124	15	20%	39%
Somewhat Positive Perception	85 - 104	11	15%	19%
Not Positive or Negative Perception	84	0	0%	4%
Somewhat Negative Perception	64 - 83	3	4%	4%
Negative Perception	44 - 63	0	0%	0%
Very Negative Perception	24 - 43	0	0%	0%

Participant’s perception scores were also correlated with the various demographic characteristics included in the questionnaire. The first correlation explored by the researcher was between participants’ perception scores and their college major. Participants identified themselves as a non-music major, music education major, or some other type of music major. The correlation generated from the data was $\eta^2 = .18$. The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 3% of the variance in participants’ perception scores was influenced by one’s college major. While not a strong correlation, the data suggest that those participants that were more likely to have a positive perception of their participation in drum corps were either music education majors or non-music majors.

The next correlations explored by the researcher were between the perception scores and the relative size and perceived quality of participants’ high school marching ensemble. The correlations generated by these data were $\eta^2 = .25$ and $\eta^2 = .27$,

respectively. The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 6% of the variance in perception scores was influenced by the size of one's high school marching band. Likewise, approximately 7% of the variance in perception scores was influenced by the perceived quality of the participant's high school marching program. No relationship was found to exist between the competitiveness of one's high school marching program and participants' perception scores.

The final correlation explored by the researcher was between perception scores and the number of years the participants marched. The Pearson Correlation gathered from this data was $r = .15$. The coefficient of determination indicated that approximately 2% of the variance in perception scores was determined by how many years one marched. Though not very strong, it is positive, indicating that those with greater number of years marched tended to have higher perception scores.

When analyzing these correlations as a whole, we begin to see a profile of the participants who have the most positive perceptions of their experiences. These members are either non-music majors or music education majors who come from mid-sized high school ensembles (50-150 members) of average quality, and they are likely veteran members returning to the organization.

Descriptive data analysis of the open-ended prompts contained in the questionnaire indicated that 59 participants (80%) received positive comments from a band director, private teacher, peer, or other individual regarding their habits and overall musicianship after returning from marching drum corps. Seventeen participants (23%) received negative comments. Two participants received only negative comments. Some of the perceived benefits participants elaborated on included greater attention to detail,

improved time management, development of a successful warmup routine, increased ensemble awareness, better understanding of intonation tendencies and adjustments, and a stronger work ethic and discipline. Members listed these as benefits as a result of marching drum corps. A negative aspect articulated by some participants was a need to abandon one's primary instrument in order to focus on the secondary instrument they were playing within the corps.

DISCUSSION

When exploring the data, the researcher was not surprised by the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the participants' regarding their drum corps experiences. However, it intrigued the researcher that other music majors (not music education majors) had lower scores than non-music majors. The researcher speculated that this might be related to those members majoring in music performance. Of the seventeen respondents that indicated they received some sort of negative feedback after tour, fifteen of those comments came from private teachers. Since most private teachers and studio professors are often more concerned with the technical aspect of playing an instrument than the pedagogical benefits future educators receive, it remains plausible that music majors outside of education would have less positive, applicable content to balance out the criticisms received by private teachers.

The profile of the participants who have the most positive perceptions of their drum corps experience was also interesting to the researcher. These members were either non-music majors or music education majors who come from mid-sized high school ensembles (50-150 members) of average quality, and were likely veteran members returning to the

organization. Anecdotally, this demographic profile covers a very large number of students throughout the country. As such, thousands of young musicians who fit this description would likely have some sort of positive experience marching drum corps.

One negative result from marching drum corps that was articulated by some participants was the necessity of abandoning one's primary instrument for the entire summer. As one might expect, this has the potential to create issues when returning to the primary instrument, but there are many solutions. Members can bring their primary instruments on tour with them to practice during laundry blocks or meals. Even though they are off their primary instruments, these individuals are still studying music and performance all summer, something that wouldn't necessarily happen if the students stayed home to take summer classes or work. One participant stated that the limited range of the music caused issues after the season, and another stated that the instructional staff would often give members comments that didn't relate between high brass and low brass. This member went on to write:

All in all, I more blame [my complaints] on certain educators being lazy, ignorant, and cutting corners, rather than the activity as a whole. Everything I have listed in this box is greatly outweighed by the pros of marching drum corps. In my opinion, it is just very easy to do in a way that inhibits the growth of brass musicians. I believe the activity as a whole is moving in a direction where this won't be as much of an issue any more in the near future.

Overall, the data seem to support the researchers' hypothesis that members of the Blue Stars, specifically, believe their time in drum corps is a positive musical experience.

Convenience sampling prevents the researcher from interpolating the perceptions of members from other corps or those from the Blue Stars that did not participate in the study. But at least for the current participants, the negative opinions of the activity must come from sources other than member's perceptions. The trend of external criticisms seems to follow a pattern of linear causality. An unhealthy emphasis on performance leads to flaws in education, resulting in bad performance habits by students. By analyzing these claims, one can better understand the reality of what occurs in the Blue Stars and why member data refutes these ideas.

INTERVIEW DATA

Drum Corps International as an organization is built on a highly competitive summer tour. With over one hundred performances across the country for corps to choose from, The Blue Stars have traditionally competed in over thirty shows during the season (Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, 2015). These shows are more or less the purpose of the activity. They are what corps prepare for, how they reach fans with their product, and during the three-day DCI World Championship Finals, they are how the corps are ranked, crowning a champion. For some, however, these competitions emphasize the wrong things. As an attempt to gain a greater understanding of some of the perceptions of the drum corps activity, the researcher also conducted interviews with two music education experts with significant drum corps experience.

Dr. Kevin Gerrity, Associate Professor of Music Education at Ball State University and the former Assistant Director of Capital Regiment Drum and Bugle Corps, discussed his

concerns and criticisms of drum corps as they relate to music education. Dr. Gerrity (2014) explained that:

The overall big criticism is that it is an absolute focus on performance, performance, performance, performance – *only*... Depending on your situation, the goal is “we need to do this, and we need to really play better, and we need to get more dynamic contrast, vertical alignment – we need to do this in order to achieve the greatest success as measured by a Box 5 description if we’re going to be competitive. And that’s what people are signing up for – I get that. They want that experience of wanting to go ahead and compete, which is great, but music is not supposed to be inherently competitive. We make it that way, but music is not supposed to be competitive.

Dr. Gerrity went on to discuss critique, the time after shows that staff members meet with judges to discuss why the corps received the score it did. Though most drum corps staffs are now made up of highly trained music educators, “[they’re] looking at this panel of people to tell you what to do to get a higher score. Do you really need somebody else to tell you what is good?” (Gerrity, 2014). With this perspective, it would appear that music educators teaching students in drum corps abandon their own ideas in favor of what judges tell them will give the corps a higher score to be more competitive.

Dr. Russ Gavin, Assistant Professor of Music Education at Baylor University and Corps Director with The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps speaks from the opposite side of the debate regarding performance. When asked the same question regarding his concerns and criticisms of music education in the drum corps activity, Dr. Gavin (2015) stated:

First off, the prioritization of scores over learning, I think, is false. We are in a performance venue, in a performance mode, for approximately 350 minutes out of the 80 days of tour, so we're looking at six hours. We do six hours of rehearsal after *noon* on every rehearsal day. The amount of teaching and learning that goes on – it is the journey. The scores – we keep score because that's what the activity is.

Dr. Gavin continued to discuss the idea of progress, stating that the corps hopes to win in the future, but knows that it won't happen this year. That knowledge, however, does not affect the emphasis of raising the standards from last year at the ensemble level, and for returning members, at the individual level. Dr. Gavin (2015) went on to compare the emphasis on scores to his son playing baseball, explaining:

Sometimes, [my son's team] gets a lot of hits, and they score a lot of runs, and they win the game – and sometimes they don't, and they lose the game. It is the reaction to that score that defines the experience for the kid... I think that when this activity is done well it is similar to that... In my band room, I could be anti-competition, but if I react in the wrong way to a kid butchering Mary Had A Little Lamb, that's a negative reality for that young musician, that young learner. It's all about what you do with the information.

It is important to note that Drs. Gerrity and Gavin agree in many ways about the overall benefits drum corps offers students, but their opinions on the activity's use of education is the point that separates the two ways of thinking. The difference in these two approaches to performance and competition is clear. The critics fear that competition is leading the educational process at the expense of quality learning, the "teach to the test" mentality

used by some educators for high-stakes testing. For Dr. Gerrity, this means focusing on technical facility and execution at the expense of other music standards typically included in an educational environment such as composition and relating music to history and culture. It may be necessary, then, to consider participation in drum corps from the competitive aspect, not as a public institution, taking into account that the outcome for the activity is competitive success through quality education, but that not all standards for music education influence that outcome. It is interesting to note, then, that none of the research participants, not even those who had a somewhat negative experience, cited the competitive aspect of the activity as a negative factor. The supporters view competition as the application of the education and experience that is the drum corps activity, even if that means ignoring a select few music standards. As a supporter of the latter mindset, Dr. Gavin brought this mentality to The Blue Stars where myself and others benefited from an environment focused on pedagogy, not competition. In this way, The Blue Stars defy the criticism that an emphasis on competition causes pedagogy to suffer. This becomes clearer when one examines the quality of educators giving the information, and how this influences future music educators in the corps.

For the majority of its existence, drum corps has been, according to Dr. Gavin (2015), “a hobbyist’s world.” In a time before Drum Corps International existed as an organization, the drum corps activity was run by competitions hosted through the VFW and American Legion, both militaristic in their origins, but neither inherently educational in their approach. During that time, corps existed primarily as youth programs. Dr. Gavin (2015) compares historical pedagogy to today, stating:

You know, back in the day, when there were 80 drum corps, Sal the baker could come in and teach the trumpets. Now that there are really only 20 something, I get 40 applications a year to be on our brass staff. 38 of those are people with some level of teacher training, and in most cases a high level of professional experience prior to that point.

In my time as a Blue Star, every brass teacher that stood in front of me teaching had a bachelor's degree in music. Others such as Richard Saucedo, Kris Hammond, and Dr. Aaron Witek have graduate degrees in music, making them much more knowledgeable about music and pedagogy than "Sal" every could have been. It is difficult to believe that a staff as knowledgeable and experienced as ours could possibly be encouraging habits deemed to be detrimental to young musicians. In fact, under Mr. Saucedo's instruction, the hornline would often play nothing but quiet long tones, the absolute fundamental of sound, not moving on until he was completely satisfied with our execution, a far cry from the loud, "drill and kill" method we are accused of being taught with. One must also consider the operational model being used in drum corps, a model that many high schools are following. The pedagogy of drum corps also includes how future educators are being prepared to apply their marching experience to their future programs. Dr. Gerrity's concern for young music educators who march is that they are being taught to adopt an operational model that cannot be sustained in most high school environments. Dr. Gerrity (2014) refers back to competition, stating:

That's my other problem with drum corps. It sets a very dangerous example for how music education should be funded in the public schools. If I want to be competitive, I need a fancy backdrop, I need 17 pieces of equipment, I

need a fancy uniform change. All of these crazy things you see, down the road you see all these high school programs try to do these things they saw in drum corps, and they'll shell out the money for it... When there are people like you in [drum corps] and that's all they get, that's dangerous.

In my three seasons, I marched with just three other music education majors from Ball State. My university experience differs from most of the future educators I marched with. I had Dr. Gerrity as a professor, constantly reminding me of these same points of consideration throughout my education. I cannot speak for the training others got outside of drum corps, so I cannot speak for how they will react to the operational model we saw employed at Blue Stars, but as far as my experience goes, my teacher training had a tremendous influence on my perception of the effectiveness of drum corps education.

Early in my Ball State career, I was introduced to the ideas of Swiss educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, particularly his concept of Eurhythmics. Developed as a kinesthetic approach to music, Eurhythmics focuses on how students respond physically with their bodies through time and space. This awareness between physical and musical ideas relates directly to the visual achievement rubric for judging in drum corps. Because of my educator training, I was able to identify that aspects of our visual proficiency scores were based on concepts taught at universities as encouraged educational practices. Music and motion are paired in the drum corps activity by definition. Without staffs needing to adapt instruction, each marching member studies music through Eurhythmics each day of tour. One respondent, a trumpet performance major, stated that, "A lot of the teaching techniques used by the staff, more along the lines of explaining concepts has helped me run sectionals outside of drum corps" (Ekstrom, 2015). Though this individual studies privately on

trumpet, the member learned effective teaching techniques that he or she still uses when working with other musicians. Like an emphasis on performance, the criticism that bad pedagogy is a trait of drum corps does not seem to be true for The Blue Stars. One must consider where, then, these bad habits and negative perceptions are coming from.

When speaking about the quality of instruction, Dr. Gavin (2015) stated:

The people who like to criticize this activity have plenty of people that they can fixate on as being the wrong example and say “this is the way drum corps is,” but that is just as ignorant as me going to the local middle school and saying “Oh, this is a bad school, because Mrs. Smith’s third period English is being taught ineffectively.” That has nothing to do with the school. It has everything to do with that individual teacher.

The same concept is true of individual learners. In a class that is being taught effectively, there are bound to be students who struggle to keep up. In a drum corps environment led by highly qualified educators, there are bound to be performers who do not meet the desired standards. At this point, the educators and the activity can only be held partially responsible for any bad habits students return with. A drum corps critic once stated that the activity teaches one method of breathing and one method of articulation, and that method is often wrong. How, then, does this differ from a student who developed a bad habit on their own or studied with a private teacher with a different approach to playing the instrument? This is where many of the biases against the activity become blanket statements with little justification.

CONCLUSION

Individual educators and performers in drum corps do not and should not define the activity as a whole. The overwhelming majority of members indicated a positive experience as a result of marching drum corps. Data from my research, quotes from university music educators who have been involved in the activity, and my own experiences, such as the ones contained in my memoir, support my hypothesis that drum corps is a positive experience for student musicians. Discouraging this experience for young people is discouraging a very real possibility for growth. Many of the criticisms of the activity are based on what individuals experienced twenty or thirty years ago. The activity is rapidly evolving. The standards of the 80s and 90s no longer apply to the activity today. Participants are being taught by some of the nation's top educators, and those educators are using techniques with a foundation in quality music education. The overwhelming majority of experiences are positive. "Blanket labels are the tools of people who don't want to think deeper on the subject" (Gavin, 2015). I have thought deeply. I have looked deeply. The results are in. For members of The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps, the activity has been a positive experience with quality educational outcomes.

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Appendix:

Data Collection Questionnaire

Perceptions of Musical Growth as a Result of Marching Drum Corps

Evaluating the effects of marching with The Blue Stars Drum and Bugle Corps on student musicianship and education.

Please read each question carefully, noting that the scale for your responses is subject to change each question.

*** Required**

1. I believe that the fundamentals in the horn routine made me a better player. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

2. I believe that singing warmups helped make me a better performer. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

3. I believe I have better tone as a result of marching drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

4. I believe I play better in time as a result of marching drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Very Strongly
Disagree

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Very Strongly
Agree

5. I believe that breathing blocks were an effective rehearsal strategy. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Very Strongly
Disagree

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Very Strongly
Agree

6. I believe that my ability to play expressively has been negatively impacted by drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Very Strongly
Agree

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Very Strongly
Disagree

7. I believe that I play with better technical facility as a result of marching drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5 6

Very Strongly
Disagree

☐
☐
☐
☐
☐
☐

Very Strongly
Agree

8. I believe that singing negatively affected my ability as a performer. *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

9. I believe that my tone has suffered as a result of marching drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

10. I believe that drum corps has helped my intonation/ear training. *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

11. I believe that breathing blocks were a detrimental rehearsal strategy. *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

12. I believe that my technical facility has suffered as a result of marching drum corps. *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

13. **I would utilize a similar brass routine in an educational rehearsal environment. ***

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
 Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

14. **I believe mouthpiece buzzing warmups made it harder to play well. ***

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
 Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

15. **I believe that drum corps has helped me play more expressively. ***

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
 Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

16. **I would use singing in an educational rehearsal setting. ***

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
 Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

17. **I believe that my sense of timing has suffered as a result of marching drum corps. ***

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
 Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

18. **I would use breathing blocks in an educational rehearsal setting.** *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

19. **I believe mouthpiece buzzing helped me as a brass musician.** *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

20. **I believe that drum corps has made my intonation/ear training worse.** *

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

21. **As a whole, I believe that my knowledge of music grew as a result of marching drum corps.** *

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6) Very Strongly Agree
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

22. **I would use mouthpiece buzzing in an educational rehearsal setting. ***

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6)

Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

23. **I believe the fundamentals in the horn routine had a negative impact on my playing. ***

1) Very Strongly Agree 2) Strongly Agree 3) Agree 4) Disagree 5) Strongly Disagree 6) Very Strongly Disagree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Disagree

24. **As a whole, I believe that my knowledge of music EDUCATION grew as a result of marching drum corps. ***

1) Very Strongly Disagree 2) Strongly Disagree 3) Disagree 4) Agree 5) Strongly Agree 6)

Very Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Strongly Agree

25. **Are there any ways not listed above that marching drum corps has had musical benefits?**

If yes, please explain.

26. **Are there any ways not listed above that marching drum corps has had a negative musical impact?**

If yes, please explain.

27. **Others have noticed an improvement in my overall musicianship since marching drum corps. ***

If yes, please define.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Private Lessons Teacher
- ☐ Band Director
- ☐ Others have not commented positively on my musicianship.
- ☐ Other: _____

28. **Others have noticed additional flaws in my playing since marching drum corps. ***

If yes, please define.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Private Lessons Teacher
- ☐ Band Director
- ☐ Others have not commented negatively on my musicianship.
- ☐ Other: _____

29. **Years Marched ***

What years were you in the Blue Stars hornline? Check all that apply.

Check all that apply.

- ☐ 2010
- ☐ 2011
- ☐ 2012
- ☐ 2013
- ☐ 2014

30. What Instrument Did You March? *

Please indicate whether this is your primary or secondary instrument.

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Trumpet - Primary
- ☐ Trumpet - Secondary
- ☐ Mellophone - Primary (Horn/Trumpet)
- ☐ Mellophone - Secondary
- ☐ Baritone/Euphonium - Primary
- ☐ Baritone/Euphonium - Secondary
- ☐ Tuba - Primary
- ☐ Tuba - Secondary

31. Are you a music major? If so please select your specific major. If not listed, please list your music major via "other." *

If not, please select "I am not a music major."

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Music Performance
- ☐ Music Education
- ☐ Music Theory/Composition
- ☐ Music Media Production
- ☐ I am not a music major
- ☐ Other:

32. My high school marching program was... *

Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience.

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ <50 members
- ☐ 50 < members < 100
- ☐ 100 < members < 150
- ☐ 150 < members < 200
- ☐ 200 < members < 250
- ☐ 250+ members

33. **My high school marching program was...** *

Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience.

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Very Low Quality
- ☐ Below Average Quality
- ☐ Average Quality
- ☐ Above Average Quality
- ☐ Very Good Quality

34. **My high school marching program was...** *

Choose the option that best describes your HS marching experience.

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Competitive
- ☐ Non-competitive

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